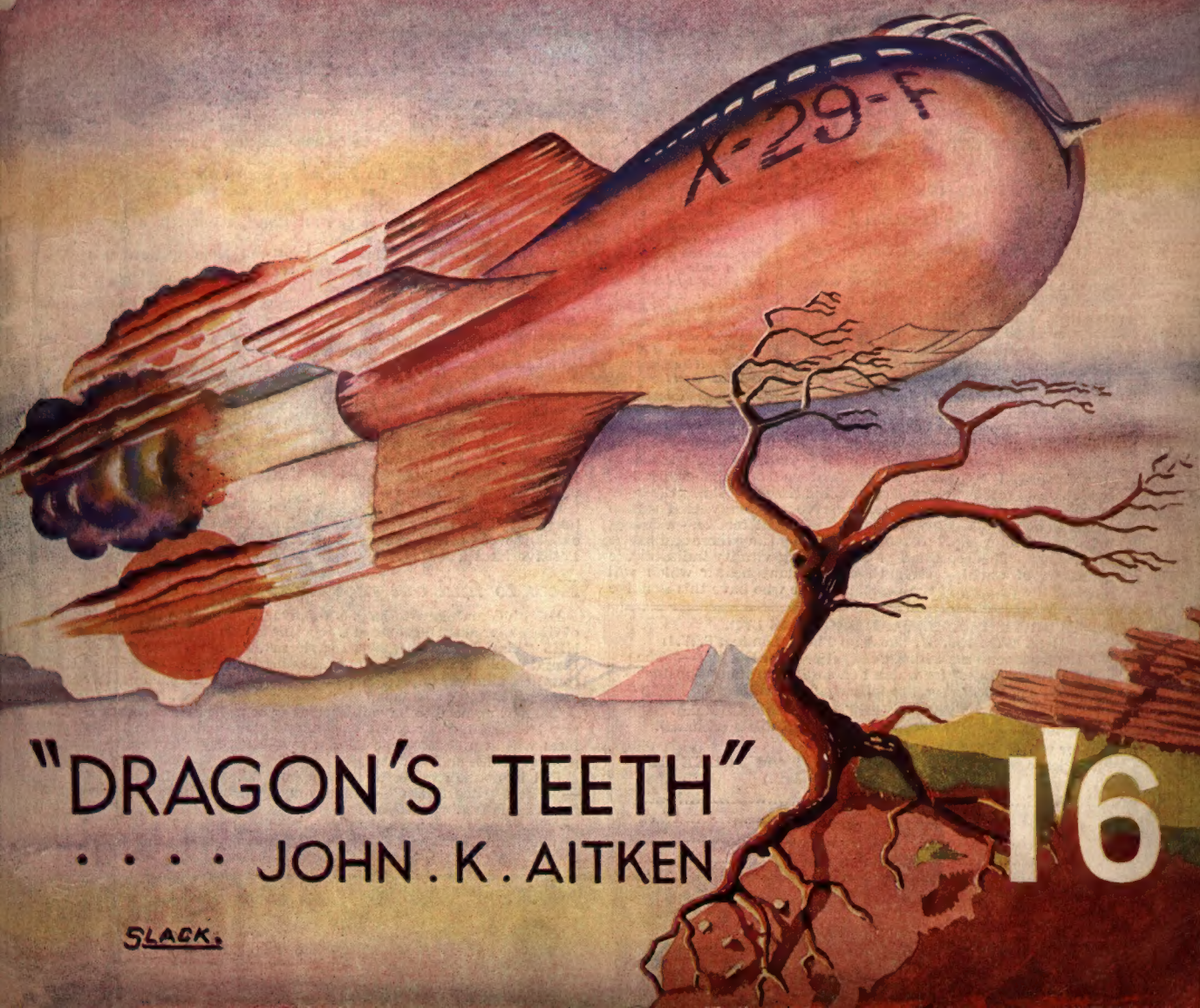


NEW WORLDS

VOL: I *fiction of the future* N° 3



"DRAGON'S TEETH"

• • • JOHN . K . AITKEN

SLACK.

1/6

• SCIENCE brings YOU a New Lease of Life!

And Fuller, Freer, Pulsating Life—not just mere day-to-day existence!

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for which I enclose 10s. herewith.

(Please write in BLOCK LETTERS and STRIKE OUT tablets NOT required.)

NAME.....
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NEW WORLDS

A Fiction Magazine of the Future

VOLUME I

NUMBER 3

NOVEL

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Passive resistance was the only weapon the people of Earth's far-flung Galactic Empire had against the Galnos. It turned out to be a nasty armament, though.

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

Cover : SLACK

Illustrations : SLACK and DENNIS

All characters in these stories are purely fictitious and any resemblance to real persons is entirely coincidental.

Published by :

PENDULUM PUBLICATIONS LIMITED, 10, OLD SQUARE, LINCOLN'S INN, LONDON, W.C.1

DRAGON'S TEETH

BY JOHN K. AIKEN

Far into the deeps of space Earth's Galactic empire had spread—peacefully. While back on Earth the Rulers took over forcibly. The colonists only had one weapon—passive resistance. It played strange tricks.

IN the broad veranda the sunlight filtered to a cool green by the roof of thin translucent stone, delicately fluted and flared; but outside the noonday sun beat down fiercely from a cloudless indigo sky. The landscape was as if drugged under a haze of heat: the little lake in the valley below was still and dull as a pool of lead, and beyond it the wooded hillside, crowned with a tower of crystal, shimmered insubstantially, a mere backdrop stirring in some unfelt breeze. So hot was it that the great white starry flowers, set in dark-green mossy foliage, which dotted the near hillside, were visibly opening out their foot-long petals and, just as swiftly, withering and turning brown.

Of the three men who sat on the veranda only one seemed in the right mood for such a midsummer siesta-time. Leaning back in his chair, he swirled his lime-green drink in its frosted glass, and his dark expressive face was masked by an elfin abstraction as he idly watched the clinking ice bob and gleam. Then his quizzical glance strayed to the low white building set in the woods across the valley, its pure curves a sublimation of the whole sleeping scene. Thoughtfully he surveyed it for a moment before turning to the two men who faced one another tensely across the table. The one, slight and fair, in tropical kit, his thin gentle face frowning worriedly: the other, massive, deep-chested, red-faced from the heat, his heavy dark-blue and silver uniform striking an incongruous note. He was speaking angrily, thrusting out his chin at each emphasis.

"Let's cut out this small talk. I've got to report on this—finally—within twenty-four hours."

"By all means, Commander Garl." The fair man spoke decisively enough but as if preoccupied; his frown deepened. "I take it that you bring some kind of ultimatum from Earth?"

"No. The One"—he raised his hand in salute—"alone knows why, but I am instructed to treat you well, more or less useless though you are. If you surrender our cruiser that crash-landed here, with its crew, pay the usual planetary due, and contribute a quota to our fighting forces, you will be allotted a place in the Galactic New Order. You will only receive a token military occupation, since"—he sneered—"you are unarmed and have a small and disunited population."

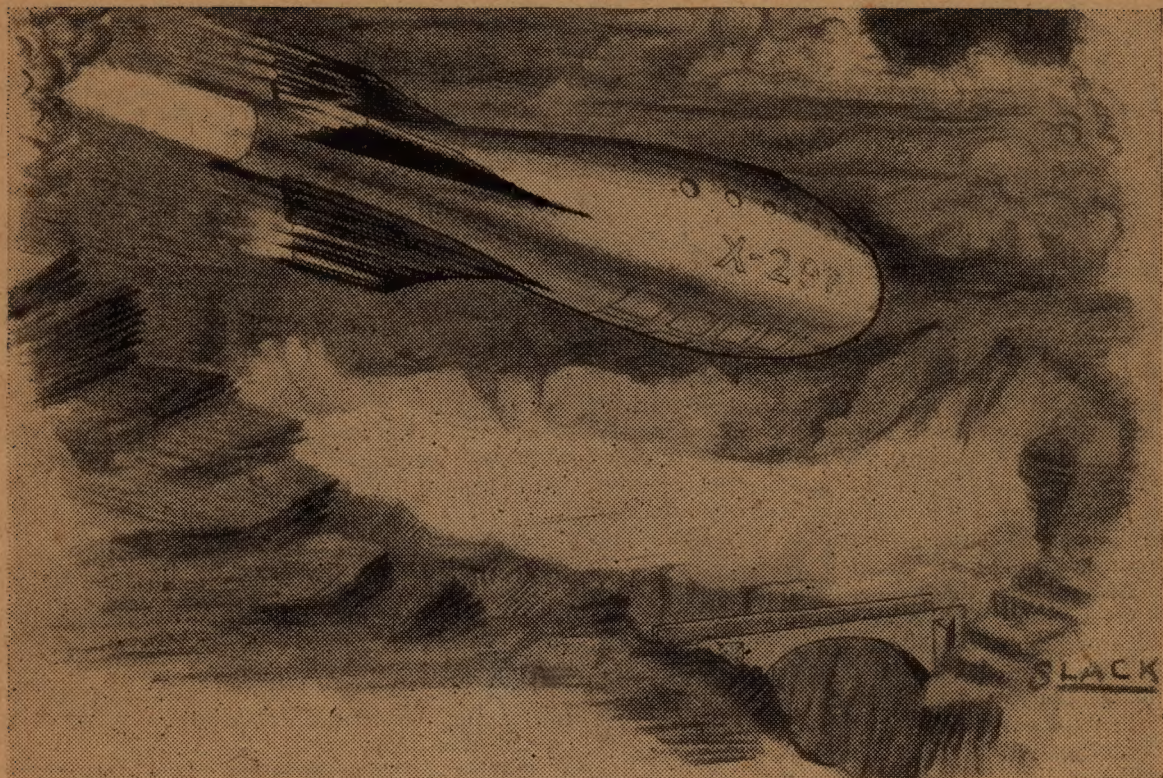
THE third man sipped his drink with raised eyebrows. "I wonder," he murmured, "just what *would* constitute a real bona-fide ultimatum from Earth?" His tone was almost perfectly serious; but the commander detected the underlying hint of mockery and turned fiercely upon him.

"I'll tell you," he said harshly. "A hundred battleships cruising up there, loaded up with a million incendiaries, a thousand tons of atomite, and fifty tanks of Black Cross—and one hour for unconditional surrender or I'd wipe out your pretty civilisation and your fancy lilies and tulips at one swoop. Look here, Snow"—he thrust his face angrily at the fair man—"I don't know why the Council's being so soft with you, but you'd better take advantage of it while it lasts, that's all."

Snow sighed. "What do you say, Anstar?" he said.

Anstar's smile had a puckish unhuman quality. "Why, of course," he said lightly, "we must accept your terms. For a people like us there's no alternative, nothing really to discuss. And we don't want to vex the gallant commander by prolonging his stay in such uncongenial surroundings—it would be sad if he were to have an apoplexy or anything . . ." As Garl purpled Snow interposed hastily.

"Yes, we accept the terms in outline," he said. "But about the derelict cruiser—we'll be glad enough to be rid of the ship itself, if your people can shift it. We've no equipment for that kind of thing, and it crashed in a field of valuable medicinal plants. On the other hand the crew—as you know, we've already had some talk with Earth about them—are all content to remain here; most of them are doing useful work, and none want to leave." As Garl seemed on the point of speaking, Snow went hurriedly on. "You know that here we believe in complete freedom of the individual, apart from antisocial activities, and it's unthinkable that we should deport these men, or agree to any kind of conscription. For one thing, Anstar and I have no authority in the governmental sense, for there is no constitutional government here. He is head of our Bioesthetics Institute, and I am a musician"—Garl snorted—"we're merely representatives for these negotiations, so we can't . . ."



"Now look here, Snow, and you too, Starstruck or whatever your name is," Garl interrupted truculently, "the fact is, you people have idled about here for so long in safety that you just don't realise I mean what I say. A lot of things that are unthinkable to you are going to happen here before I'm through—and for one, those men are going to Earth to stand trial as deserters—and be shot as such—just as soon as transport arrives. See? And if you're wise, you'll agree without any more objections. You individualists talk too much."

There was a short silence. The Anstar spoke quietly. "Tell me, Commander Garl, why, exactly, is it necessary for your forces to occupy our little planet?"

"The present situation is intolerable. The presence, as near Earth as Alpha Centauri, of an independent planet means constant possibility of attack."

"By an unarmed disunited people a hundred thousand strong?"

Garl reddened. "At any moment some enemy might occupy you for use as an advanced base against us."

"And who are these possible enemies? Now that Polaris III is—gone, I don't know of any planet near Earth except our own which you haven't occupied."

"The further systems are rearming with all speed at this very moment."

"I don't blame them—I assume it's your intention to occupy them to prevent their use as advanced bases by still more remote systems?"

"All this bloody logic is very fine!" roared Garl, purple with fury and heat, "but it doesn't alter the fact that we're going to occupy you whether you like it or not, and we're going to make you work as you've never worked in your lazy lives. When I'm commandant here I'll see to that. Or if you prefer, I'll be in charge of the raiding force that wipes you out."

"BUT my dear Commander," Anstar said calmly, "you misunderstand me. All I want to do is have the position clearly defined. You are in no danger of any kind from us, and all our products you need you already get under an equitable trade agreement. Your sole motive, therefore, is conquest for its own sake. Well, we are agreeing to your terms—I just want to make it quite clear that you are aggressors, that you are acting against an inoffensive and unarmed people with no shadow of justification, and that we would be within our rights in taking any offensive action against you."

"Argue it any way you like," sneered Garl, his temper once more under control. "We'll come just the same, and you've nothing to take offensive action with—which is just as well for you. In the meantime, to put your acceptance into effect, you are to construct a spacefield to take warships of all

types—here are the plans, and you must have landing-space at least for our flotilla when we return in four day's time."

"Four days?" began Snow protestingly, but Garl cut him short.

"Four days, if you know what's good for you. Remember," his voice was a threat, "I'd just as soon put you where you belong at once, and if you give me any excuse I'll be glad to take it."

"Why not invent one?" demanded Anstar placidly. "You've no scruples over the occupation—why stick at wiping us out—from your personal point of view, I mean?"

Garl stamped across to where Anstar sat at ease and glared down at him. "I'll remember you," he grated. "You're the type we can do without in the New Order." He swung about, barked "four days!" at Snow, and strode swiftly down the hillside towards where the light cruiser waited in the valley. A few moments later came the roar of the take-off rockets, abruptly silenced as the ship went into spacedrive.

Anstar picked a grape as large as an orange from a great violet-leaved vine which draped over the edge of the glowing golden-green roof.

"We should have paid more attention to Earth politics ten years ago, Snow, my friend."

Snow was pacing worriedly up and down. "I don't know how you can be so detached about it," he said finally. "*Haven't* you any emotions?"

"I honestly don't know," Anstar replied thoughtfully. "Of course, I'm very fond of Amber and you and Vara and one or two others—young Elm at the Institute, for example—but it may be just as I'm fond of features of the landscape. I suppose we'll see when they start breaking the place up."

"Wasn't it rather irresponsible to bait him as you did?"

"Oh no. That was tactics. *He* may be stupid, but the Council of the One aren't. They know our products are valuable and our technique in producing them is very skilled, so they can't afford to wipe us out. I've put a lot of thought into this—even groomed young Elm for quisling."

"Eh?"

"Historical figure—gave his name to a series of puppet rulers set up by the fascists in occupied countries in the twentieth century wars on Earth. Usually picked up from the criminal classes. I'm building up Elm's dossier of misdeeds—he gets a great kick out of it. And he's Earth-born too—they'll very likely make him head of the Institute when they demote me."

"But why are you trying to focus their attention on yourself?"

"More tactics—so that the rest of you will be comparatively undisturbed. No," as Snow started to protest, "it's not martyrdom or anything, it just seems to me it's the best way of handling it. *You're* the brains, you see."

Snow shook his head. "Wish I could even be as calm as you."

"No good losing your temper with a natural force. And that's what it is—the psychology of mass misery. The girls aren't going to like this, though."

"But what are we going to *do* about it?"

"Oh, I've a plan—same methods we used on the cruiser's crew, more or less. But the research isn't complete yet, that's the trouble. So we'll have to stall for time, and it isn't going to be too easy."

"Perhaps you'd better tell me about it," Snow said mildly, "if you're going to put me in charge of it."

"You're a deceptive creature, Snow," said Anstar. "Most of the time I'll swear you even deceive yourself . . . yes, I'll tell you while we're getting this landing-field under way."

THE mossy plant on the banks of the little lake was so fine and even that it might have been some velvety stone, but for the little brilliant purple and gold flowers that spangled it. Calm and gleaming, the lake was an invitation to escape from the afternoon heat, to swim and dive among the great water-lilies. But Amber was in no mood for swimming. She faced Anstar furiously, her hands clenched at her sides.

"What all this amounts to is that you've surrendered the whole place, for good, under a vague threat that they probably couldn't, and certainly wouldn't, carry out. Oh, you are a couple of spineless ninnies—if you're the best men we can produce I'm almost glad the Galnos are coming!"

"Be reasonable, Amber—if you'd taken an interest in galactic affairs you'd remember how they "recolonised" Polaris III—enveloped the whole planet in Black Cross and wiped out every living thing, except for three couples in a pleasure cruiser who got away and came here. Those people were industrialised and their chief resources were minerals, and the Galnos just took them over when the Black Cross had hydrolysed. The only reason they don't do that to us is that we're primarily agricultural and have some specialised techniques, so they've got to occupy us and dispose of us gradually. And of course Black Cross is expensive stuff, and difficult to make and nasty to handle. But if we resist they'll cut their losses and wipe us out at once—and enjoy it!"

"Well, I'd rather *be* wiped out than live for a little as a slave—or worse—and be disposed of when my use is past!"

Anstar smiled. "You are a little tawny fury when you're angry," he said placidly.

"Oh you're hopeless!" she burst out, near tears. "You don't care a damn what happens to me or anyone else, even yourself—you just stand round getting an esthetic kick out of it!" She swung round, plunged into the pool, swam fiercely

across it, and ran up the bank towards the woods, her hair flaming and sparkling in splendid disarray.

"You oughtn't to treat her like that," Snow said seriously. "She—she's very fond of you, you know, but she doesn't understand that kind of logical attitude, cool and collected. You'll drive her into something foolish."

"But I must tell her what I think—I can't be intellectually dishonest. What do you think, Vara?"

The tall fair girl looked at him acutely and spoke slowly. Her voice was deep and soothing, but none the less her words bit.

"You enjoy goading people, and you were goading her. Perhaps indeed you should have spoken as you did, but first, you should have told her of the plan. She'll have to know of it, because her work's of importance for it. You deliberately withheld it to see how she reacted."

Anstar smiled blandly. "You're very acute, Vara dear. What had we better do about it?"

"I'm *not* going to lose my temper with you," she said sedately. "It'll clear itself up when things start to happen—you're not nearly as selfish as you're making out at present. But by then damage may have been done."

"What d'you mean?"

"Mutation five of the Great Blue Antheria is part of the plan, like my melon, isn't it?"

ANSTAR was frowning now. "Yes. How did you know?"

"Oh, I've had my eye on that plant and on you for some time. I'm a psychologist as well as a biosynthesist, you know. I think it's partly the plant that's had this effect on you, even in its earlier mutations—it's your effort at immunisation. Well, there's only one seed germinated from mutation five, isn't there?"

"Yes. I suppose she told you a lot of this?"

"She told me, too, that the plant reminded her of you in its self-sufficient beauty and compulsion. Well, how soon d'you think you'll hit the same mesotron intensity—without her help?"

"Oh *lord*. I suppose she's gone to the lab. Excuse me."

He was off, running pantherishly upstream to the bridge. Snow turned to Vara.

"Why didn't you warn him sooner?"

"I think it's best as it is—it'll shake him out of the state he was getting into."

"D'you really think she'll have destroyed the plant—her own precious work?"

"I'm sure of it. However, there's always my melon—if I can improve the taste of the thing."

"You can still taste the mould?"

"*Can* you! It tastes of nothing else, except the alcohol! How long d'you think we've got?"

"A week perhaps—Garl said four days. But of course they may not disrupt all the research work at once. You'll have to be prepared to report fictitiously on your work. And I suppose they'll

put me on to something—harvesting the giant nettles probably."

Suddenly her eyes were full of tears, and when she spoke again her voice shook. "Oh Snow, is it going to be alright—or are we just planning in a silly vacuum? Was I right in letting her go? It's all so vague, this plan—I'm so afraid it'll end in killing and suffering and horror . . . Snow?"

He kissed her. "Vara darling . . . this is unusual! I *do* believe you're right. It's worth sacrificing a plant to have Anstar whole-hearted instead of thinking of it all as a game. And as for the plan, it must be vague, but for us . . . it's the only way."

His arms were round her, but still she sobbed and sobbed.

II

HOT, breathless and, for once, dishevelled, Anstra burst into the glade in which stood the dully-gleaming milk-white buildings of the Bioesthetics Institute, just as Amber came out of the main entrance. Her face was white and stern: she gave him a straight hard look and then, without speaking, turned away towards the little brook that chuckled down through the clearing.

"Amber." His tone was gentle and questioning, so different from his usual one that she turned back, surprised and undecided.

"Amber, have you done it?"

At this she burst out again. "I suppose Vara told you what I'd do, the sly little——"

"Don't, Amber."

She flung back her hair. "It's so horrible to be analysed and prodded and checked up on as if you were an experiment . . . yes, I've smashed it, killed it, and I'm glad!" Suddenly the tears came, and she buried her face in her hands. "But I loved it so, it was so lovely——"

"Dear Amber, don't . . . it was my fault, I was intolerable." Diffidently he took one of her hands. "We can do it again—you see, what I didn't tell you, what I should have told you, was that I've been preparing a plan against the Galnos—Vara guessed, of course—and mutation five is . . . was . . . will be part of that plan."

For a moment she was held speechless, staring at him. Then, very slowly, "And I've . . . ?"

"No, Amber, *I* killed that plant. Will you forgive me, and help to reproduce it?"

"Of course," she said quietly. And then, before he could speak, "You're planning to use the same tactics we tried on the cruiser's crew?"

"On a bigger and more refined scale."

"Oh, Anstar, d'you think it'll work?"

"I just don't know—even what chance we've got. Of course, they don't expect any resistance, and they won't send a strong force—no Black Cross or anything. The delicate part will be to arrange it

so that no hint gets back to Earth. We may come unstuck at once—we aren't very practical, and even Vara's only got theoretical knowledge of Galno psychology."

"I suppose it's all we can do, really."

"I can't see any other way. Now look, what we must concentrate on is reproducing the mesotron strength that gave that mutation."

"It's easy enough to get a beam of the same mean—but it's so critical, the speed's so high, that all the seeds that have shown signs of mutation have been killed. Except that one. And quite apart from that, the fluctuation in speed is an awful nuisance. I've kept on being fooled by specimens of mutation four, and a lot of the seeds in each batch are just killed outright by extra high-speed mesotrons."

"Have you thought that what we called five might be a double mutation, altered again to a resistant type?"

She hesitated. "I don't . . . but of course, it could be—since that seed was unique and so we didn't dissect it!" Her face fell. "But Anstar, the chances against doing that again!"

"Oh, I don't think it's so bad," he said. "We can still step up the *intensity* of the beam a great deal, which'll heighten the chance of a double mutation, and if we can think up some improved velocity control . . . no, it's really the growth time that worries me, the appalling lag after we've made the seeds."

She smiled, and he squeezed her hand. "That's easy now—I was saving it up as a surprise for you. Merrill's finished that synthesis."

"Hormone G?"

"Yes, he's made pounds of it already. So long as we can keep up the nutrient supply, we can grow them overnight now—when we get the seeds." Impulsively she went on, "Let me do it all myself!"

"It's not for *you* to make reparations."

"It isn't that"—she dimpled—"it's pride! And I'm going to begin now." She detached her hand, and turned back towards the Institute. Then, struck by a sudden thought, "How long have we got, Anstar?"

"A minimum of four days. Snow thinks very likely longer. Because, he says, their continued easy success will have reduced their organising efficiency—it being so easy just to use extra force if necessary. Say a week."

"I'll have something by then." It was a statement of fact, as she said it.

ANSTAR climbed the slope to Snow's villa slowly and thoughtfully. All our knowledge of tactics, or virtually all, he mused, is theoretical—when we apply it for the first time things will go wrong. The point is, will we be able to improvise? Or will the enemy, less intelligent but practical, just

get on to the fact that we are conspiring, and deal with us? However, he decided, the tactics are the right ones. The rest is up to us.

As he neared the villa he became aware that Snow was soothing himself to his usual placidity in the way that suited him best. From the long cool living-room came an ordered flow of crystalline music: a gently comic tune weaving in and out with itself, standing on its head, chasing its tail, and finally sorting itself out and marching, hand in hand with itself, to a climax of quiet perfection.

"That's a lovely thing," Anstar said as he went in. "What is it?"

Snow got up from the neochord, smiling a little wryly. "As a matter of fact, it's by an antique Earth composer—man named Bach. I was just reassuring myself that there were, or had been, some good points to those people."

"I'd no idea they ever reached such a stage of artistic development."

"Of course, it is the kind of thing *you* would like particularly."

As Anstar began to unlimber his artillery of argument there came a solemn knocking at the front door.

"Lord!" exclaimed Snow. "Who *can* that be? No one ever bothers to knock at the door!" He hurried into the hall, and as he opened the door Anstar heard his surprised exclamation.

"Korphu! And Pharal! My dear fellows, this is very unusual—is anything wrong?"

A glutinous voice answered. "Wrong! I am surprised, Snow, that you can ask such a question without shame."

Anstar hastened into the hall, to be greeted with disapproving glances from the two pompous and rather plump individuals who had just come in. Hurdle number two, he reflected sardonically.

"Ah!" continued Korphu. "Here is the ringleader! Anstar, we demand an explanation."

"And a good explanation," put in the second man antiphonally.

"Ah!" said Anstar with extreme gravity. "I was afraid you two would be along as soon as you heard the news. Acuteness such as yours would inform you in no time of the seriousness of the situation."

"More than that, Anstar," said Korphu with matching solemnity.

"Very much more!" echoed Pharal's reedy tenor.

"We consider that your decision to surrender was totally wrong, a complete misinterpretation of the wishes of the majority of our people, an absolute negation of the will to complete freedom of action and expression which for so long has been, if not the sole, at least the most important—"

"But look here," put in Snow with rising impatience, "have you considered—" In his turn he was cut short by Anstar.

"No, let Korphu finish, Snow," he said reprovingly.

Mollified, Korphu took up his ponderous period. "—the most important aim of our small but highly integrated and developed community." He took a deep breath. Phalar nodded his approval.

"There is much, very much, in what you say, my dear Korphu," said Anstar slowly. "I would hesitate to make any final reply to your criticisms on the spur of the moment, for the decisions involved are so extremely weighty. But this at least I can and do say: it has never been my intention to remain quiescent under the Galno yoke. On the other hand, resistance, to be effective, must be a matter for careful planning, and any precipitate action might lead to quick disaster; so we thought it best to accede to a token occupation, to appear ready to consider conscription and so on, while we deliberate such a plan. Perhaps you would care to consider such a proposal with your friends."

Snow, finding he had been holding his breath, let it go, while Korphu nodded judiciously. "I see," he said. "We have to some extent misjudged your part and Snow's in this matter. If you permit we will take our leave to discuss at once the points you make; in due course I will communicate to you the feelings of our section."

As Korphu turned to the door Snow said, "Won't you stay and have a drink or something?"

Korphu shook his head. "Thanks, my dear Snow, but no. The time for ceremony, for meaningless phrases and observances, is past: time is now fleeting, vital. I must form a committee before the week is out." In solemn unison the two bowed and departed.

Anstar sighed, and then smiled. "That was diplomacy," he said smugly. "Pompousness is the word for those two. A good thing I was here—you were on the edge of blowing up, weren't you?"

"You are strange," Snow said. "Why take such pains to propitiate those two fat fools? Particularly when you've just done your best to make Garl burst a blood-vessel!"

"Psychology, Snow," Anstar said lightly. "Anyway, it's far too hot to be angry. But you see, Garl did put his finger on our worst weakness in this situation—our very freedom, or softness as he'd call it. Even in a crisis, we'll argue about ends and means, and that means hesitation, and *that* means defeat at the hands of a totalitarian organisation. You can't see us enduring untold hardships in a rearguard action in the swamps."

Snow shuddered, and Anstar went on emphatically. "So we must do our utmost to unite beforehand, and use our advantages—superior intelligence, capacity for individual action, and biological knowledge—to act quickly, even without a majority vote, before our civilisation starts to crumble."

"But why, then, didn't you tell them there's a plan in being?"

Anstar laughed a little bitterly. "Because the minute the occupation is a reality, it's that very Korphu-Phalar faction that will turn round and say we must co-operate with the Galnos rather than run the slightest risk of reprisals—and they'll give away anything they know."

"I can't believe it."

"You can take it from me," Anstar said seriously, "that all the bad behaviour isn't going to be on the other side." He paused for a moment. "After all, I've already given an example of that myself."

"Amber?"

"Yes—but at least that showed me our danger—so that I didn't do it again with Korphu and Phalar."

"Anstar," Snow said gravely. "Can we bring ourselves to *kill* the enemy—if it—if it seems to be necessary?"

Anstar shrugged. "It's an issue I've avoided," he admitted. "If the plan succeeds it won't be necessary, and if it fails we're doomed in any case. That's my logical evasion. But all kinds of things may happen—an isolated case may come up where it must be done—and of course, when they've been here for a while we may begin to feel quite differently about it."

Snow shook his head.

"I'm not so positive about the future as you," Anstar said. And then, "I'm going down to see how that concreting's going on, and then to bed. I'm asleep on my feet."

"WELL, a week's gone by and they haven't turned up. Not even an ultra message." Anstar, propped on his elbows, was watching the flick and swirl of the silvery half-transparent fish in the dark cool green of the lake. "The field's fit for landing. Lord, I'd be almost disappointed if they didn't come after all."

Snow laughed mirthlessly. "I shouldn't." Then after a pause, "D'you think we're taking this seriously enough, Anstar?"

"You mean, d'you think *I* am?"

Snow smiled. "Well, perhaps. The point is, are we planning in sufficient detail—do we all really know exactly what we've got to do?"

Anstar shook his head. "Can't be done—at least, not to begin with. Oh, it'll turn out there are lots of things we ought to be doing now, but we can't possibly foresee them, so we may as well rest. Except Amber. This pause has given her time to repeat mutation five, and I really don't believe she's slept since that day, except while she was waiting for the focus to steady. You know how keen she was on doing it all herself."

"She has done it, then?"

"I think so. She's worked out a most ingenious mesotron velocity-control, and stepped up the beam intensity to the maximum, and it looks as if the

double mutation idea was right—anyway, she's had a lot of germinations. Come along and see if you like. They should be just about full-grown by now, and you've hardly seen any of these things, have you?"

"No. Of course, I never used to be particularly interested in that work."

They crossed the little bridge and strolled up the path that twisted amongst the flame-trees, at present arrayed in sombre dark green with no hint of the gorgeous inflorescence that autumn would bring, up to the Institute buildings with their clean white curves.

The main laboratory was cunningly lit with concealed daylight lamps, and all around on the benches stood great quartz bell-jars, each containing a plant of the same type: at the base a spreading rosette of velvety dark-green leaves, from the middle of which sprang a solitary stalk, at present rather more than three feet tall, bearing a single bud.

"I was over-optimistic," said Anstar. "They won't be out for an hour or so yet."

"How does it all work?"

"We supply them with fifty times the amount of growth hormone they could make for themselves, and keep them under intense u.v. in an increased pressure of carbon dioxide—the roots in the usual solution—effectively it speeds up the whole life-cycle about a hundred times. You can easily see them growing."

Snow watched, fascinated, as young, tender, crisp leaves appeared at the base of the stalk, grew and darkened and took their place in the almost unnaturally symmetrical rosette; as the stalk steadily forged its way upwards and the bud swelled, becoming a deeper and deeper violet.

"Why are they so astonishingly symmetrical?"

"That's one of the points settled by the pioneers of bioesthetics. Simply, no factors to produce dissymetry. No pests, no weather, even lighting, homogeneous feeding—it becomes almost comparable with growing a crystal."

A door slid back, and the hum and throb of dynamos deepened for a moment. Amber came in. She walked tiredly, almost dragging her feet; her hair looked tangled and drab in the lavender glare of the lamps. But as she saw the two her face lit up.

"Come to see my babies?" She walked, springily now, across to Anstar. "I've done it, my dear—truly! The first one, in the next lab has just blossomed, and I'm holding it there. Come and see!"

Snow entered the electrical laboratory behind the other two, and for a moment they were between him and the flower. Then they stood aside to let him see it.

"Ah!" he said softly, and was silent. A great velvety azure bloom, its petals intricately, but so perfectly arranged; at their heart a touch of deep

cold violet matching their underside, and the whole exquisitely poised on its long slightly curved stalk, so that it seemed it must flutter away on the first breeze. Entranced, Snow traced the intertwining curves of the petals back to the centre, back to that cavern of night-violet. Presently he would step forward and stroke them, feel their cool silkiness, but for now it was enough to immerse himself in this astonishing beauty, to stand rapt before this miracle of blueness.

HE was shaken by the shoulder, his head wrenched away. Annoyed and bewildered, he turned, began to speak angrily, met the amused and contented faces of Amber and Anstar.

"You've been there, quite still, for an hour and a quarter, while we've been right round the building," Amber informed him. She was radiant with success in spite of her weariness.

"Good lord!" stammered Snow, "it's unbelievable! How long would I have—?"

"As far as we know, you'd have stayed there until you fainted from fatigue or hunger. Elm begged us to leave him in front of it till he dropped, to see how long it did take, but we couldn't stand it after he'd been there a day. We took him away. He was rather scared when he found how weak and shaky he'd got, too."

"But why all this, exactly?"

"Why bioesthetics?" demanded Anstar. "The fact is, that many life-forms, particularly plants, bred entirely for their beauty, have a powerful hypnotic effect on human beings. Partly the satisfaction which their perfection gives, partly their complex lines, so wonderfully co-ordinated . . . this plant is exceptional, of course, because it has everything an artist could want—colour, form, size—though now that we've improved the mesotron technique we'll be able to do much more even than this."

"Well, it's an amazing business. If I look at it again, now, will it have the same effect?"

"Try it."

Snow turned again to the flower, and instantly felt at peace, felt the worries of his world drop from his mind in a whirl of azure. Again he was wrenched away, felt a momentary surge of anger.

"We talked to you that time," said Amber, dimpling. "Home truths—but I don't think you can have heard!"

"Is it habit-forming?"

"In a way," Amber said. "It's a psychological effect—you begin to feel a compulsion to go into the lab and have another look. But you can immunise yourself by repeated short doses—with an ally to see that they *are* short, of course. Until we found that out it was really rather dangerous working with them, even the earlier mutations that weren't nearly such a good colour."

"Will it be as successful in the open air, subject to weather and so on?"

"That, time will show," said Anstar. "Anyway, for the moment we're relying on specimens raised here. Incidentally, *no one*, not even the staff here, not even Elm, must be told of the immunisation experiments."

"Surely we can trust anyone here!"

"Remember, Snow, we're all untried. We've always had an easy life and complete freedom. We just can't tell how we'll behave under the kind of compulsion they may hand out to us."

"Well, I can't believe one of *us* at least would give away anything."

"You're too good to live, Snow. I can't even guarantee that I myself won't break down if sufficient drastic torture is applied."

"Good heavens, Anstar, they won't torture us!"

"They'll do anything if they find out we're up to something. So we've got to conceal the fact that we're up to anything till it's too late—for them, as Galnos at least."

As they spoke, suddenly there came a roar that filled the sky, swelling to an intolerable blast of sound that made the whole building quiver. Through the window they had a momentary glimpse of a gleaming cruiser belching violent fire. Then, as swiftly as it had been shattered, silence fell again.

"I think," said Anstar quietly, "that must be our friends the Galnos. I hope they've come down on the nice landing-field we made for them, and not on Vara's melon-beds."

"I suppose we'd better go and officially welcome them," said Snow. He was very pale, and his voice shook.

"I think so. The girls too, I think—can you stand it, Amber?"

"Just about. We can collect Vara on the way. She'll be at the Biosynthesis Station."

"It's just like them," Snow said gloomily, "to come in and land without even warning us by ultra—I suppose they rather hoped we *hadn't* got things ready for them."

III

BY arrangement Snow and Anstar met, late in the afternoon, at the Institute. Both had had to wait while the military policeman guarding the entrance had radioed the Galno headquarters already established at the spacefield.

"I don't like this," Snow said. "They're watching everywhere, yet they're quite polite—they've got something up their sleeve, someone's told them something—lord, I was never meant for a conspirator."

"Better come up to my study," advised Anstar, "before we start any discussion. Remember, freedom of speech disappeared from Alpha Centauri IV when those rockets were switched off."

Snow laughed bitterly. When they were ensconced in the long room, a combination of

office, laboratory, and apartment, which was Anstar's headquarters and his home, he went on, "I suppose they may have installed microphones here for all we know."

Anstar smiled, shaking his head. "A little quick, even for them," he said. "They have me on their list, of course. That nasty little bit of work with Garl gave me a mean look when we were introduced—what was his name?"

"Siebel—Dr. Siebel, I think—chief of what they call Intelligence. He frightened me—those little snake's eyes."

"Yes. But keep your hair on. Judging from what they had to say, I suspect that they'll make you nominal head of the Galno state of Alpha Centauri IV for the time being. I think they've summed you up as an ineffectual intellectual who'll do what he's told, so if you can maintain that pose you'll be damn useful to us."

"It should be easy. It's about what I am. A quisling, in fact."

"Don't be an idiot, Snow," Anstar said affectionately. "You've got twice the mind and force of character that I have when you can be bothered to think about anything except music—by the way, you've got to be prepared not to be able to get in touch with me. They might put me in a concentration camp."

"In a what?"

"You obviously haven't read up the Second Dark Age. You should—it's that period of history which has helped me to understand how these people work." He went on, in a tone of detached speculation. "Curious to think that we may be on the verge of a Third Dark Age which will make the other two look like domestic troubles."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that, Anstar," said Snow, distressed. "I sympathise with Amber over that trait of yours."

"No, you're wrong there," said Anstar decidedly. "There's nothing to be gained by suppressing the dangers we're facing. It stimulates me to think that we're one of the bulwarks—we may even be putting up the only *intelligent* resistance the Galnos will meet."

"Well, I prefer to think of these things in personal terms." His frown deepened. "I wish we'd thought of getting Vará and Amber here too."

Anstar shook his head. "Too risky. If we were visited by the enemy, it'd look like a conspirators' meeting—to them at least. Normally there's no one much here at this time, except myself and perhaps Amber. And that reminds me"—he walked over to a cabinet of black rough-finished plastic that stood against the wall—"we'd better have a drink to make this look like a convivial occasion if we are intruded upon." As he poured the golden, bitterly aromatic drink, he smiled. "We aren't very practised conspirators—we should have had all our communication system settled before they came. Come to think of it, we're

probably the only inhabited planet without any organised mechanical transport or communications."

"I suppose it's rather strange we haven't more of that. I can't say I'm sorry, though."

"Ye-es. I'd agree with you, ordinarily. Now it may be a handicap, though I'd regard it as a symptom of true civilisation. Of course, in our early days—three hundred odd years ago—they had plenty of it. We dig up remnants occasionally, in the plantations. But now, quite apart from the fact that we don't *want* to rush about at hundreds of miles an hour, or carry vast loads, or communicate with someone within five seconds, we don't *need* to. We're self-supporting, our exports have very high value in proportion to bulk, and our population's concentrated." He sighed. "None the less, we could use a bit of it now."

"I don't know," Snow said. "The very fact that we haven't any will most likely make them underestimate us, with their different standards."

"True. In fact, they've already shown signs of that. And the plan's independent of mechanisation. As long as the power-plant here remains to us, that is."

"I suppose the girls could carry messages without much risk—the Galmos don't seem to rate women's intelligence very highly."

"Perhaps—it's just as things turn out. But lord knows, we ought to be able to deal with them. Four cruiser-loads, perhaps a thousand men not very heavily armed, until they bring their fixed armaments—against a hundred thousand of us."

"I've an awful fear that if they keep you out of the way I'll just do nothing."

AS Anstar raised his glass, not replying except with a smiling headshake, there came a slight sound from the window at the back of the room. Both men swung round nervously, to see a tall fair square-headed young man just climbing over the sill.

"Why hullo, Elm," said Anstar, eyebrows elevated. "This is a little unorthodox, isn't it?"

"Quick, Anstar, I've come to warn you . . . I . . . I've been such a fool! I don't know what it was . . . the sight of all those uniforms and the band, all so shining and splendid like the processions we used to have on Earth when I was a kid . . . I felt . . . I felt I must . . ."

"Well, come on, man, come on, what are you telling us?" broke in Snow fiercely, to be quelled by a gesture from Anstar.

"You've told them about mutation five, I expect?"

"After all our work together, all your planning for just this, I must throw it away for schoolboy glory." The youth babbled on, hardly hearing Anstar's quiet question.

"But what made you change your mind so quickly?"

"Garl laughed at me, laughed at the idea of a flower being dangerous! He said they'd soon settle it with a Westing if it started nibbling their ears off!" He was almost sobbing.

"Now look here, Elm," said Anstar, suddenly stern. "Your latent militarism has pushed you into an emotional give-away to the enemy. Now, the fact that the enemy didn't take you seriously and laughed at you for a silly schoolboy has driven you back to us. How do we know what you're going to do next?"

Elm looked at him speechlessly.

"How do we know," went on Anstar remorselessly, "that they haven't put you up to this to get back into our confidence?"

"Oh lord, Anstar, you don't think that, do you? Truly, I see I've . . ."

"No, boy," said Anstar, smiling suddenly, "I don't. But I had to be sure. Now pull yourself together and stop being apologetic—you look like being just as useful as we planned. First, did you tell them that Snow or Vara or Amber were involved?"

Elm shook his head dazedly. "I would have if he hadn't laughed so much," he said gloomily. "They didn't give me time. I didn't even tell them it was you, but they assumed it was."

"I suppose it means that all the members of the Institute are potential suspects," Snow said.

"Yes," assented Anstar, "but as they aren't taking it too seriously and as they already suspected me, it doesn't make much difference." He poured out a drink for Elm. "Here—this'll do you good. What did little snake's-eyes seem to think about it?"

"Siebel? He smiled—but not as if he meant it. And then he said, 'We must see that this—Anstar—is protected from himself.' It was the way he said it that woke me up to . . . to what I was doing, so I got away as soon as I could to come and warn you."

"How did you manage to get away?"

"Oh, after a while they told me to run along and be good, and they'd make me leader of the scientists in the new state"—savagely. More quietly he added, "The thing is, till Siebel said that, I'd really been thinking of it all as a kind of game which didn't matter much . . ." As he was speaking, there came a commotion from the entrance below, heel-clickings, shouts of command, the rattle of weapons.

"Quick, Elm!" whispered Anstar. "They mustn't find you here—out the way you came! The girls are at the Biosynthesis Station—tell them how things are."

"But Anstar," Elm began protestingly, "you must go—you can't stay here and let them—"

"I *must*, Elm—it'd give everything away if I ran away—quickly now, off with you, and take that tube of mutation five seeds."

With a resigned shrug Elm slipped across to the window and ducked over the sill, flourishing the little quartz tube as he disappeared.

"He can be mulish," sighed Anstar. "If I hadn't appealed to his sense of romantic adventure with the idea of getting out the seeds he'd have insisted it was his duty to stay here and ruin everything."

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. "His glass, Anstar!" breathed Snow, "three glasses and only two—" Already Anstar had snatched up Elm's glass and whipped across to the cabinet, murmuring, "At least they make mistakes too—or they *aren't* taking us seriously—they haven't covered the rear of the building."

THE door was thrown open, and four men in the blue and silver of the Galnos marched in; they spread out on either side of the doorway, and Garl and his Chief of Intelligence entered. Garl was a massive and rather splendid figure; but somehow he seemed insignificant compared with the little white-faced man beside him. At first glance, perhaps Dr. Siebel did resemble some reptile or rodent, but a second look showed the high forehead, piercing eyes, and narrow mouth of an intelligent and ruthless man. Now he was smiling, but not a friendly smile.

"Just a little discussion of your altered standpoint?" he asked. His voice was cultured and his tone smooth and not unpleasant: there was nothing in the words or emphasis to make Snow shiver. But shiver he did.

"We were wondering how this . . . this business would affect our bioesthetic research," Anstar said easily. "Perhaps you can help us?"

"My dear Dr. Anstar, I came here with the express purpose of discussing that very point. It is a very worthy research, the pursuit of natural beauty and goodness, and I feel we must do our utmost to ensure that it continues—with, perhaps, some few minor alterations." He seemed to savour the words for a moment before speaking. "For example, I do feel that your own quite exceptional talents may be somewhat misapplied just at present. But let us see what you are doing here before we come to any final decision." Here Garl attempted to intervene, and received a sudden basilisk glance from the little man that silenced him.

As Anstar led the way downstairs to the laboratories Snow had to resist the impulse to shout that he wouldn't play any more, that he wasn't built for situations like this. Ridiculous, he thought, they know our plan and we know they know, but they don't know we know—and what, what in the lord's name is going to happen now?

Anstar was lengthily describing the techniques used in developing new mutations and in stimulating growth, agreeing that, as far as he knew, the mesotron-bombardment method had nowhere else been developed; he switched on a flood of ultra-violet to light up the series of huge bell-jars, empty now after the recent harvest. He did not mention what plants were thus raised.

"Ah yes!" said Siebel gently. "Most illuminating—this, I presume, is where you were expediting the growth of the Great Blue Antheria, mutation five, which formed the main part of your rather, forgive me, infantile plan for disposing of us?"

Snow had to admit that Anstar's acting was magnificent: he was heartily glad that he had not had to produce it. Anstar swung round to face Siebel, hands clenched; then, apparently pulling himself together, smiled uncertainly.

"The service you command is excellent, Dr. Siebel."

Siebel bowed, smiling; but his eyes negated his smile. "Before we go into the question of what happened to the seeds, I understand that next door there is a specimen in bloom?"

"I take it that your information includes a knowledge of the possible effects of seeing it?"

"Naturally. I am looking forward to the experiment."

Anstar shrugged his shoulders and slid back the door leading into the electrical laboratory. He stood aside to let the two Galno leaders enter. Siebel stepped straight into the room, and then turned to Garl, who was hanging back and obviously extremely reluctant, and beckoned him with a sharp jerk of the chin.

"The brave commandant is of course not afraid of the humorous plant which might try to nibble his ears off?" he said softly, his eyes glinting.

Garl flushed, growled under his breath, and strode forward. Abruptly his stride checked, an exclamation was bitten off short, and he stood as if frozen, gazing at the great flower. Siebel darted his quick glance from the plant to its victim, and then turned with a grim little smile to Anstar.

"A most convincing demonstration! If it worked with him you'd really expect it to work with anyone, wouldn't you? But I'm afraid I am rather a poor subject—you see, I am completely colour-blind, and have a high degree of astigmatism, a contingency which you had perhaps overlooked?"

Anstar made a tired gesture. "I am afraid we have been at peace too long to conspire very successfully."

"My dear Dr. Anstar, you underrate yourself. Your tactics succeeded admirably with the crew of our cruiser. My study of your exchanges with the Council on that matter convinced me that you, at least, are a formidable foe. The old myth of the lotus-eaters' isle! Assuming that on that occasion your main weapon was a narcotic vapour, we are all breathing through ultra-absorbers, though I assured our experts that you would not repeat your effects. I am not disappointed. And now," his voice became a thin cold blade of menace, "and now, there is this little matter of your late harvest. Where is it?"

Anstar shrugged. "You can have the seeds—for all the good they will do you, or us. They are

infertile—it would be necessary to prepare mutation five afresh every time it was wanted, if that could be done.” He picked up a quartz tube, similar enough to the one Elm had taken, and to Snow’s dazed mind came a sudden surge of hope; hope that Siebel had been truly outwitted. But at his next remark the hope dimmed.

“They may or may not be as you claim—may or may not be your late harvest. I fear that we shall have to hold you for questioning.” The last word ever so slightly drawn-out and emphasised. But Anstar faced the man unflinchingly.

“I see that you are the type of man who inevitably suspects wheels within wheels.”

“In the first stage of a conquest, before examples have been made, there inevitably *are* wheels within wheels, Anstar. You are not the beaten man you pretend to be. You are dangerous and intelligent, a focus, perhaps the only one, of resistance on this planet. You must be made an example.” He turned to the four guards at the far door. “You will hold this man, permitting him to see no native. To-morrow he will be questioned.” As the four marched forward, he slid shut the door of the electrical laboratory, concealing Garl from them.

“But Dr. Siebel,” said Anstar, apparently unruffled, eyebrows raised, “aren’t you forgetting your Commandant?”

“I think he is quite happy where he is for the moment,” said Siebel smoothly. The four guards formed up, two on either side of Anstar, staring woodenly before them, and pinioned his arms.

Anstar smiled. “Oh well, Snow,” he said. “We did our best. Tell Amber not to worry—and don’t you go and . . . and do anything silly.” He was marched away.

Siebel turned to Snow. “And now, my dear Snow, that we have dealt with these little matters that might have affected our mutual understanding, perhaps you could give me a meal and a bed? I hope that such a request, in this hotel-less land of yours, is not out of place, for really I shrink from spending another night with those primitive arrangements which are all that cruisers or military camps can afford.”

Snow pulled himself together. Anstar’s plan seemed to be succeeding, as far as the negative part was concerned—and so now it was up to him. Unconsciously he squared his shoulders as they stepped out into the golden twilight that filled the glade. Siebel, watching him closely, smiled his little deadly smile.

“I see, Snow,” he said, “that you are not yet quite convinced of the helplessness of your cause, and that I must give you a little warning—or rather, a little demonstration. A pity—a waste of beauty.” He spoke briefly into a little transmitter, and then pointed silently at the great crystal tower set on the summit of the hill above the Institute, gleaming now with fierce sunset splendour. As his arm

stretched out, the tower was suddenly enveloped by a spike of agonisingly bright violet flame. In a moment it was gone, and with it, the tower. Siebel turned back to the horrified Snow.

“I should open your mouth,” he said pleasantly, unhurried. “Or the blast of the atomite may break your eardrums.” With mathematical precision at the end of his sentence came one deafening, staggering concussion. The ground lurched, there was a crash and tinkle of glass from windows of the houses up on the hillside, and bewildered people ran into their gardens.

“Believe me, Snow, I could do that as easily, and with no more compunction, to any part of your little planet. Is it to be co-operation?”

Snow nodded, not trusting his voice.

“Come then, and let us eat. I understand that your fruits are quite wonderful. And all this excitement has really given me a keen appetite.”

STILL shaking, Snow found himself leading Siebel across the bridge and up towards his villa. His mind was in a turmoil. Could it really be that Siebel could destroy on such a universal scale? No, he decided, that’s preposterous—that demonstration was prearranged purely to impress me. But as an example of the lengths to which Siebel would go, it was not encouraging. And what was to happen to Anstar in such hands? And why had Siebel abandoned Garl, his superior officer, at the Institute?

“You appear slightly distraught, friend Snow,” remarked Siebel amusedly.

“I’m not used to happenings of this violent kind,” answered Snow, trying to sound fussy and pettish. “I am a musician, not a soldier—I—surely it was unnecessary to destroy the crystal tower like that? It must merely antagonise the people.”

“We never mind much whether or not we antagonise the people, as long as we convince them that resistance is useless. And the sooner we do that, the less violence in the long run, and the more production of your medicinal plants and other things for the New Order. You people have had an easy life, and will not be difficult to coerce. You are soft, compared, say, with the inhabitants of Polaris III, whom we had to discipline quite severely. I believe you have heard of that?”

“I find your callousness about these—deeds—extremely distressing.”

“Then let us not discuss them.”

They walked in silence for a while, Snow striving to eliminate from his expression the fury of loathing and determination which possessed him. When they arrived at the jade terrace and found Vara awaiting them, he had almost recovered his self-possession.

As they went in to supper, Vara remarked lightly to Siebel, “This occupation of yours seems extremely casual. I’m surprised you care to come

up here, perhaps surrounded by deadly enemies, without a vast bodyguard, and unarmed. We might poison you!"

"Dear lady," said Siebel, "I am sorry to disillusion you as to your chances of bringing off a surprise attack—but to spare your decorative life I will be quite frank about my defensive arrangements. First, I am in fact armed effectively enough so that neither of you would have the least hope of succeeding with a sudden assault. Second, I can communicate by radio with a bodyguard not so very far away. Third, our crowd-psychology data applied to your people indicate no danger from anyone not directly involved. In other words, practically the whole population will take no hand. We have broadcast a soothing explanation of the crystal tower incident, and a statement that Anstar is in temporary protective custody. And as to poison—well, I am not unobservant—naturally I shall eat nothing upon which you have not first set the seal of your approval."

"Well, I will say that you put your cards on the table," Snow said. He did not find it difficult to infuse a tinge of hopelessness into his tone. "Perhaps you will tell us what you propose to do with Anstar—and with Garl, if it comes to that?"

"Yes," said Siebel, smiling his little smile. "I will tell you, for uncertainty is extremely bad for one's digestion. Anstar—I have allotted him a place in the New Order . . . a small place . . . six feet by three approximately . . ."

Vara was on her feet, white-faced, the mask of urbanity gone. But Snow shook his head, speaking as if totally discouraged. "Don't, Vara, it only makes it worse. These people are utterly ruthless, and there's nothing we can do."

For a long slow minute Vara surveyed Snow. Then she sat down without speaking. Siebel darted his quick glance from one to the other. "Where was I?" he asked, as if no interruption had occurred. "Ah yes, Garl. I have never got on too well with him, and in any case I do not consider he is quite the type to deal with people of your kind. Too susceptible to feminine charm; and yet not sensitive enough. I think," he glanced at his watch, "I think an accident is going to befall Commandant Garl." He regarded his watch silently for a moment, smiling. And then, hard on the heels of a brief glare of violet light from the long windows, open but curtained, came another of those shattering concussions. Not so violent this time, perhaps, but enough to billow the creamy curtains into the room, to make the floor leap and the glass and cutlery ring and jangle.

"Yes," Siebel said softly, "a little before time if anything, Garl's accident. I much fear that some damage may have occurred to your Bioesthetics Institute, but still, all your productive techniques are well established."

"The Institute too?" said Snow dully.

"The Institute. May I express the hope that the charming but perhaps slightly excitable lady Amber is not working overtime."

Vara was walking unsteadily towards the open window. She turned now, and said chokingly, "Better for her if she was, if . . . if Anstar . . ." Suddenly she appeared to regain command of herself, and stood gazing at Siebel as if he were some phenomenon she was trying to analyse. Snow, too, was standing, fists clenched; but Siebel remained unperturbed.

"Please do not leave us, lady Vara," he said. "There is a broadcast from Earth in a few moments that I want you both to listen to—if I may use your ultra receiver?" Without waiting for a reply he strolled across the room and switched on the set; and Snow found time to smile, he hoped meaningly, at Vara.

IV

"THIS is the evening ultrawave news from Earth. The situation on Alpha Centauri IV., famous for its drug industry, is clarified. By an overwhelming majority the population of this planet have elected to join the Galactic New Order. Dr. Snow, leader of the people, said, in an address of welcome to the Galno deputation, 'With perfect faith in our common great future, I deliver our planet into the safe hands of the greatest of all leaders—the One.' Dr. Snow has, of course, retained his position as leader of the state. News from the various war-fronts . . ."

Dr. Siebel smiled as he switched off. "A wonderful thing, this ultra-wave transmission. Already, you see, they know on Earth exactly what the position is here . . . and so, it is immutably set, crystallised into a pattern which will persist forever. 'The One' . . . he gave the salute . . . "has ratified it. And he has expressed to me, in advance as a matter of fact, his keen sorrow at the loss of our brilliant Commandant Garl and the destruction of your Bioesthetics Institute. By the way," his tone hardened slightly, "do not believe for a moment that you have any chance of informing Earth of what you might claim to be the true facts about Garl's last moments. For one thing, all ultrawave transmitters are now in our hands, so that your message will take four years to arrive, and much may happen to the sender in four years."

"You see, Vara," said Snow flatly, "it's quite hopeless to struggle. These—people have us completely in their control. Convince yourself of that for your own sake."

"Well said, friend Snow," said Siebel. But his tone was cold and his look searching. Then, more lightly, "And now, lady Vara, I am hoping to taste this melon of yours of which I have already heard so much. What is its secret?"

Vara found herself answering, her creamy contralto surprisingly steady. "It's a question of symbiosis. The melon we started with was deficient in taste and food-value, except for sugars. We have induced a mould to grow in partnership with it, feeding on its sugar, and producing several valuable vitamins, some alcohol, a number of highly scented esters which improve the flavour, and a hormone which assists the growth of the parent plant. Here's the result."

Returning from the sideboard, she put on the table a scarlet neolith bowl in which, in a nest of ice, reposed a globular ebony-black melon. When the first slice was cut, revealing the dark wine-coloured flesh, a waft of a subtle but heady scent drifted into the room.

"Delicious!" breathed Siebel. "If the flavour matches the scent you have not been over-praised." Vara noticed that he was watching them closely, waiting for them to begin. With an amused glance at Snow, she set the example.

After a few mouthfuls, Snow looked at Vara. "How did you manage to overcome the mould taste so quickly?" he asked; his voice slurred and trailing away almost to a whisper.

"We didn't," she answered slowly. "You see, this isn't really that melon at all. It's the one that biosynthesises stasitin, you remember? We've never had much to say about it, because there are lots more economical ways of making that drug, but this struck me as a useful stand-by for now, so I've been growing them to-day. And luckily I brought one along from the Station this evening. I might have known Dr. Siebel was to be our guest. I'm sorry, my dear, that I had to include you, but there was no way of giving you the antidote in advance. I've paralysed you both."

She turned to Siebel, quivering and tense in his chair, making a gigantic effort to move his left hand a few inches. As she watched, the drug took full effect, and he slumped back, seeming to shrink. Suddenly he was an insignificant, almost ludicrous figure; but for his eyes, which blazed at her still.

"An insidious drug, isn't it, Dr. Siebel?" she said gently. "Not a muscle can you move to call your bullies. You've plenty of time to meditate on your past misdeeds and possible fates." She walked across to Snow, and was stooping over him with a tiny hypodermic when quick footsteps on the terrace outside made her pause. The curtains were brushed roughly aside, and a burly figure stumbled into the twilight room.

"COMMANDANT Garl!" Vara's sorely-tried self-possession almost gave way once more. "We thought—Dr. Siebel said—"

"Siebel—he's here?" His voice became a snarl. "I have a little score to settle with that—" His eye fell on the helpless man. "By the One! What goes on here?" He swung fiercely upon

Vara, who gathered herself for yet another effort at dissimulation.

"These two," her voice was deep and scornful, "have been celebrating to the point of paralysis their successful removal of you and their plans for running the planet together."

Shaking with fury, Garl was levelling his Westing at Siebel, when Vara caught his arm. "No, Commandant! Think—don't be hasty! If you shoot them, there's certain to be an inquiry from Earth." She repeated the words of the ultra newscast, and Garl nodded thoughtfully.

"For a woman you've got plenty of sense," he said. "But by hell, I'll rid myself and the State of that snake!" He was pacing up and down, his voice rising. "Left me fixed in front of that damned overgrown tulip while he got the guards to bring up a load of atomite and blow up the whole place, and if it hadn't been for some fool setting the whole lot off just before they got there I'd have gone too. As it was, it blew me off my feet and smashed the plant. Treason—yes—" His voice lingered on the words. "Perhaps it might be better to let the One decide on their fate!" His eye roamed over the room, returned to Vara.

"Here, wench, I've a mouth like the Martian plains—cut me a slice of that melon!"

Vara could hardly believe her luck. Submissively she cut a slice of the black melon.

SNOW, sitting back at ease, surveyed Vara with a mixture of bewilderment and elation. "You are amazing," he said. "You might have been plotting all your life! I gave up hope when Garl came in."

"Well, he did rather play into my hands. Of course, I'm amazed we didn't think of the stasitin melon before, instead of fiddling round with the symbiotic one, trying to produce a slow-acting and fallible thing like alcohol."

"It's as Anstar said, we aren't mentally oriented for war. We're bound to make elementary mistakes. We've been lucky so far, but we've a long way to go yet. Did you think I'd sold out to Siebel, by the way, at any time?"

"Don't be silly. I know you too well! It's as well he didn't, or he'd have seen you were acting."

"Talking of acting, I think we'd better move fairly fast now—they're bound to do something when they find they've lost their leaders. Siebel's guard may come prowling in here if they don't hear from him soon. But oh, Vara, what a change from a couple of hours ago—and all your doing!"

"Mostly luck." But she smiled so enchantingly that he could not help but kiss her. "Things are better, though, aren't they? The Institute's all right after all—even Anstar I can't feel so badly about, now that these two—"

"Could we hold them as hostages against his release?"

She shook her head. "It'd bring us into the open. And besides, their minds don't work that way, it would amount to losing face. Still, they won't—kill him—as long as he might tell them things—only—if they—question him and—"

"Don't like his answers?" Snow put in with a wry smile.

"Yes. But I think we can count on twenty-four hours before they reorganise. If we can get out of here."

"What are we going to do with Garl and Siebel? We can't leave them to be found."

"Oh Snow, yes, I've been worrying about that. We *can't* kill them in cold blood while they're helpless!"

"I know. Though Anstar said . . . I know! We can put them down in the refrigerator! No one'll think of looking there—and they'll live under the stasitin indefinitely, won't they, even in the cold?"

"Of course! Come—we'd better do it at once."

It was a grim and anxious task, dragging the two men, to all appearances corpses, down to the refrigerator room: anxious because a chance jolt to a communicator might bring the guard on them. When it was done the two crept to the rear of the villa and peered out into the dusk.

"Misty," whispered Vara, "and the blue moon's just rising—it's two hours ahead of the red to-night. Luck again. They'd see us a long way off if the red moon were up."

Snow slid the door quietly back, and they stole cautiously out onto the hillside which rose steeply behind the villa. This mist was chilly and the grass slippery with dew, and they had to go carefully to avoid the boulders and thickset evergreen shrubs which dotted the upper part of the hill. Vara shivered. "I didn't know, when I dressed the part of a brainless hostess, that I'd be creeping about in the mist later in the evening," she said. And then, "Snow, we left the light on in the living-room!"

"All the better," Snow said softly. "It'll make them think we're there, for a while anyway."

They worked their way slowly along the hillside, slightly ascending, and suddenly emerged from the mist into full moonlight; the moon, floating just clear of the farther hill, faced them across a milky sea of mist that filled the valley. Farther down, beyond the villa, a blue-white glare beat up through the mist, tinged at one side with a fiery orange.

"The spacefield, where their camp is," Snow said. "I wonder if they've still got pickets all over the place."

"Bound to," said Vara. "And fairly soon they'll start worrying because they've heard nothing from Garl or Siebel, but I don't think they'll start a search before morning."

"I think we're far enough from the villa to start downwards now."

THEY turned down into the mist once more, angling so as to reach the stream near the bridge. The going became easier and the slope gentler, and soon in the quiet of the night they could hear the murmur of the stream. Warily approaching the bridge, they found no one on guard and walked brazenly across it. As they started up the path through the wood, the dim blueness of the mist became tinged with green, gradually warming to orange, and the visibility improved.

"Just timed it nicely," said Vara. And then, "I wonder where the explosion was."

"They wouldn't have come along this path, they'd have crossed by the lower bridge."

The mist was beginning to thin, and by the time they came to the clearing they could see both moons, the red one, unnaturally large and a deep stormy crimson, hanging just clear of the palely glimmering Institute buildings. The place seemed deserted: no light came from the windows, and there was no sign of Earth soldiery.

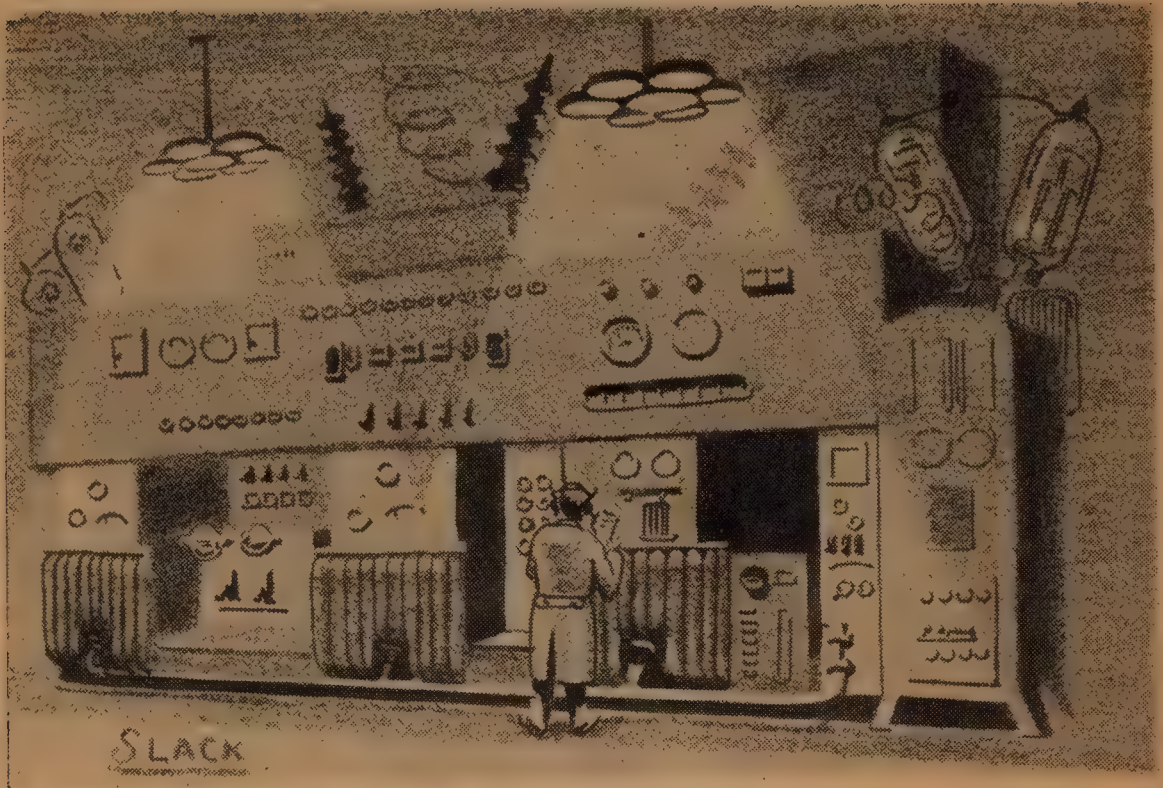
"Of course!" said Snow suddenly. "They think it's destroyed! There's no one to tell them the atomite went up too soon, and the mist prevented them from seeing that it was still here. We'll have it to ourselves for to-night."

Quietly he slid back the door, and they stepped in. "Don't switch on the light till the—" Vara began, and suddenly clutched Snow's arm. "What's that?" she said. Faintly above the hum of the dynamos came an irregular sound, a human voice. Vara's grip relaxed. "I think it's Amber," she said relieved. "She's crying—in the big lab. I expect."

She fumbled with the door. It opened, revealing the dimly moonlit laboratory, and Amber, huddled at her desk, her head on her arms, a picture of defeat which caught at Snow's heart.

IN an hour, things changed a good deal at the Institute. The windows of the main laboratory had been sprayed black, and the arc-lamps were in full blast. But the change in Amber was the most complete. Always mercurial, she was now almost over-confident.

"Of course, I was tired," she said. "All the twenty-hour days I'd piled on top of one another just fell on me in a lump when Elm told me they'd taken Anstar, and I didn't feel I could face anyone, so I came down here and started up another batch of mutation, just for something to do. And then I wandered about—I couldn't sleep—and found Garl stuck in the elec lab. That jerked me up a bit, and I went up to the villa and got there just in time to hear you apparently selling out to that little worm. Well, that was the last straw, unless you count the explosion. I don't know how I got back here, and when I did everything was upside-down



and Garl was gone. I just felt I couldn't face anything—I never even thought of having a vivik-seed to pull me together." She laughed almost joyously. "Oh Vara, I've been so mean about you sometimes, and that melon idea of yours was so marvellous! But how did you happen to have one grown?"

"I didn't, till to-day," Vara said placidly. "But I had plenty of hormone G, and when the plant came up Merrill and I doctored the fruit with esters until we thought the bitter taste was bound to be covered up. But I must say, I never bargained for such a success with the scent."

"Look," Snow broke in worriedly, "we must find Elm and get those seeds back. I know there's another lot of mutation under way, but we must get things started as soon as possible. Lord knows what'll happen to-morrow; it wasn't really part of Anstar's plan to be actually held by the Galnos, and we'll have to speed things up if we want to get him out before.—Vara, where's Elm likely to be?"

"Lurking somewhere," Vara said. "Probably round the Galno camp, if that's where Anstar is."

"Well, I'm going to look for him. When they find they've no central direction to-morrow they'll probably round up half of us as hostages."

"No," said Vara flatly. "I'll look for Elm—you stay here and help Amber. I'm a lot better at finding my way about at night than you—" She broke off abruptly as the door was suddenly

opened and a masked figure flourished a Westing at them, with a shout of "Don't move, anyone!"

Amber giggled, and Snow glanced nervously at her, thinking she must be hysterical. But when she spoke her voice was normal enough, though shaking with amusement. "Don't be silly, Elm," she said. "It's us—we were just coming to look for you."

Elm snatched off his mask. "Oh hell!" he said, "I was sure I'd caught some of them. I thought all of you were up at the villa. I'm no good at this game," he finished despondently.

"You've come at a highly useful moment, anyway. We want to start another lot of plants—you've still got the seeds?" asked Snow.

Elm nodded. "But that plan'll never work, will it?" he said gloomily. "The trouble with us is, we've been too subtle—think of trying to hypnotise people with the beauty of a flower! We ought to be gassing them or blowing them up. Anstar was right when he said we'd been peaceful too long to be any good at things like this, but he didn't realise that applied to his plan too."

AMBER flared up. "Our passive tactics worked perfectly on the crew of the Galno cruiser—and without bloodshed too! And we've advanced a lot since then. It was scent we used on them, and that's not nearly so reliable as mutation five."

Elm snorted. "That crew were all as good as dead when they landed anyway. You could have tied them up one by one for all they could have done about it, instead of fancy tactics like narcotic-scented lilies—and as for mutation five, it didn't have much to say to Siebel, did it?"

"You . . . you . . ." began Amber furiously, but Vara intervened unhurriedly but decisively. "Both sides show a rare detachment in being able to discuss historical questions so heatedly while their freedom is in some danger. But do please postpone your perorations. Amber's quite right—we mustn't kill people unless it's sheerly unavoidable; but she was wrong to lose her temper. Give me those seeds, Elm."

Amber curtseyed to Elm, who bowed, and said rather sulkily as he handed over the precious little quartz tube, "What I was going to say was, couldn't we do something with that lichen I was working on, that lived on iron compounds and oxygen and produced hæmatin instead of chlorophyll? If we gave it hormone G and salt, it ought to eat into their ships and metallic equipment fairly fast, oughtn't it?"

"But are their things made of iron at all? I thought it was all light elements," put in Snow.

"Ships that have the spacedrive have steel hulls, because weight doesn't particularly matter," said Elm. "And Westings and other electrical stuff have soft iron or steel parts."

"We can talk about this as we work," Vara said. "Will you start the flow of nutrient solution, Elm?"

Swiftly the work began, Snow contenting himself with fetching and carrying at the instructions of the others. "This lichen idea of yours, Elm," he said presently. "How were you planning to get it started—I assume it does actually live on metal?"

"Oh yes," said Elm. "At least it can if it's got a little common salt to work with. But of course, even with hormone G it wouldn't grow so darned quickly that they couldn't kill it off easily once they'd spotted it. But I was thinking, if we could occupy their attention for even twelve hours it would give it time to ruin their armaments."

"Except atomite, which is what they've used exclusively so far," said Amber tartly.

"What is atomite exactly?" put in Snow mildly.

"Ask Elm—he used to use it," said Amber.

"It's a synthetic radioactive element which is unstable. Capable of atomic explosion, but needs high activation before it starts," said Elm, with an angry glance at Amber. "The activation is provided by an alpha-particle source—almost any of the heavier particles will do if there are enough—which is screened by a lead-glass bulb or something of the kind."

"There's a good little text-book," said Amber.

"Amber!" protested Snow. "Don't be so provocative, you're as bad as Anstar!"

At the mention of Anstar Amber fell silent and went grimly to work. When the seeds were in place she said, "I think we must risk enhanced amounts of hormone and CO₂ on the chance of getting some flowers by morning. It might make all the difference."

Vara nodded. Then she turned to Elm. "Have you some spores of that lichen?"

"Yes. A few."

"Don't sulk, Elm dear. I think you should get some plants started so that we'll have plenty of spores to-morrow night if we want them, after all, they might easily overlook them in the dark, and the damage would be fairly large by morning, wouldn't it?"

"Yes—if we could keep up the hormone supply."

"Mmmm. Still, it's worth getting ready. Though lord knows, the situation'll probably be quite different by then."

V

MORNING found Amber despondent once more. "The extra dose has hardly speeded up the growth any further," she said. "We must have reached the limiting rate of cell-proliferation. So they won't be ready till noon at least, and meanwhile the Galnos'll have found out everything. We ought to have tried to rescue Anstar last night."

They were assembled in Anstar's room, trying to revive themselves with vivek-seeds. "Talking of threshold values," went on Amber, her voice a little blurred, "I've almost reached *mine*, even with these seeds to keep me going. I just can't remember when I last slept. Am I really rocking to and fro, or is it optical?"

"You are swaying," said Vara, a little alarmed. "I'm going to take you out and make you sleep in the woods for a little."

"I wish I could sleep afloat in the lake as usual," Amber said fretfully. "Promise you'll wake me at noon."

"Yes, I'll hypnotise you if you'll let me—" Vara was beginning, when there came a shout from Elm, who was surveying the landscape with a telescope. "There's a big Galno squad—Siebel's bodyguard, I expect—just come out of your villa."

"Well, they haven't found us, or anything else probably," said Vara. "Which way are they going, Elm?"

"They're not going back to the spacefield, they're taking the track that runs down to the lower bridge—they've got something on a truck, and they're hurrying . . . damn, they're out of sight behind—" He was interrupted by a brilliant violent flash from the opposite hillside, followed by the now almost familiar atomite explosion. When the smoke had cleared only a patch of scorched vegetation with a scar of white limestone at its centre showed where the villa had stood.

"Oh Snow, Vara!" said Amber brokenly. "All your lovely things, your home—*can* we go on with this?"

Snow's expression was that of a child lost in some slum, seeing for the first time the possibilities for vileness in the world. "My neochord . . . all my music . . . our books . . ." he said slowly, looking unseeingly, desolately, about him.

"I can see them again," Elm said. "Lord! They've crossed the lower bridge and turned up this way—and the thing they've got's an atomite bomb!"

There was silence for a moment. Then Elm spoke again, his voice rising hysterically. "I said they're coming here! They're going to smash us! What are you going to do—stand about and let them do it?"

Snow was very pale. "I suppose they just happened to notice the Institute was still here," he said. "Just bad luck."

"Bad luck!" Elm said, shrilly. "It'll be a lot worse if you don't *do* something!"

"Oh!" sobbed Amber, "it's too much, really, really, just when it looked as if . . . oh, what fools we were not to get ready to shift some of the stuff—we'll be just helpless now."

"We'll be rather more than helpless if we stay here much longer," Vara said flatly. "Elm, go and get the new lot of mutation seeds—some of them must be ready. We couldn't have moved the power-plant however much time we had. Come, Amber—you two men had better leave separately. We'll meet where the crystal tower was . . . no, in the vivik-tree grove as soon as we can get there."

Snow made a desperate effort to pull himself together. I can't even retreat coherently, fine leader that I am, he was thinking gloomily, when suddenly the misty pearly dawnlight in the room flicked into a savage white-violet that momentarily blinded all four with vivid retinal images. Before they could see again came the stupendous concussion, making the building hum like a giant tuning-fork, and blowing in the transplex windows like huge bubbles.

Vara was the first to speak. "Please, Elm," she said. "Just as soon as you can see—"

Elm was already at the window. When he turned to the others his expression was a mixture of exultation and puzzlement. "It is queer," he said, "that lot blew themselves up just as they were detouring the crater the first lot made, just after the bend in the track. Must be a hoodoo on the place. And lucky for us these windows aren't glass."

"D'you think they'll send some more, Vara?" Snow said shakily.

"No," said Vara thoughtfully. "Their position's obscure now. They don't know where their leaders are, though someone must have taken over to have

got them doing anything, and they've had two terrible and inexplicable accidents. I think they'll round up some of the people for hostages, retire to the camp, and call Earth for a punitive force."

"An then what?" said Amber sharply. "You know, Elm is right—we're being too passive. We ought to equip everyone with anything that'll hurt, and flatten them out before they can get over this, instead of letting them send for a lot of troops and Black Cross so that they can do what they like with us. Think of leaving those two *alive* in the villa! I know they're dead now, but that's only luck. We *can't* win without doing *something* positive."

VARA and Snow were regarding her with amazement, Elm joyfully.

"Well, I'm glad someone's got some sense," he said fiercely. "After all they've done, even here, let alone on Polaris and those places, you've got to be squeamish about killing a few of them. . . ."

"Hush, you two," said Vara. "Elm, remember you were hot on their side twenty-four hours ago. Amber, remember Anstar is a prisoner and would certainly pay the penalty for a direct attack. His position now can't be any too . . . oh!" she broke off suddenly, "I *can't* go on being sensible for everyone . . . I'm so *tired*!"

"Vara darling," Snow said gently. "We all are—we must rest before we do anything more or we just won't last."

"But what are we going to *do*?" wailed Amber.

"Sleep," said Snow firmly. "But, all of you, here's something to occupy your minds—*why* did those two atomite charges go up at exactly the same place? We *must* know."

Elm shrugged impatiently. "It's not foolproof stuff. Coincidence."

Snow shook his head. "Anstar would never accept that."

"Oh Snow," said Vara wearily, "even I get a little impatient with you sometimes. Do come along, we can't sleep here. I can't see what conceivable importance this query has—we aren't likely to be able to lure a third gang of them to that spot, even if we knew it would happen again."

Snow smiled. "It is nice to see occasional traces of the unscientific feminine in you, Vara," he said, and became lost in thought as they started downstairs.

Even now sleep was denied them. Outside the entrance were waiting Korphu and Phalar, a dignified delegation of two.

"Snow!" began Korphu at once, rolling out his words like blobs of syrup, "we are by no means satisfied—"

"Look here!" cut in Snow, almost angrily, "can't this wait?"

"Wait? In the middle of an enemy occupation? Are you out of your mind—you, the nominated representative of our people?"

"Well, make it brief."

"I am unlikely to prolong this discussion longer than is absolutely necessary."

I wish that were true, thought Snow. His eyelids were leaden and his head seemed to surge to and fro on humming waves of fatigue. As from a distance he heard Korphu continuing.

"Speaking as the representative of a large section of the community, I may say that we are profoundly dissatisfied with your attitude in this delicate situation. You appear to think that you can run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. The—er, the enemy, that is to say, the Earth forces, have given you a position of responsibility. You are abusing it, permitting acts of violence which can only strain the situation. These explosions, with which I understand you are concerned, have been most unsettling. Many windows were broken, our gardens were damaged, there may have been injury or even loss of life—"

"Who gave you to understand that the explosions were anything to do with me?"

Korphu turned to Phalar, who piped up like a clarinet to the other's bassoon. "This morning an Earth force has been combing our hillside, getting people out of their beds and taking them into custody, including all the crew of the derelict cruiser. Their leader told me that the blowing-up of the crystal tower was your responsibility."

Snow choked. Korphu nodded portentously and took up the tale.

"In these circumstances, assuming that these latest occurrences are also your doing, we must inform you that you can no longer count on our support unless you instantly modify your attitude."

"And you are the very people—" began Snow bitterly, and then made a mighty effort. In a daze of sleepiness he seemed to see Anstar's face floating before him, smiling its twisted but attractive smile. "Now, gentlemen," he said. "You are intelligent and realistic men, and I need not mince matters with you. Do you seriously think that if the *enemy*"—Korphu winced—"if the enemy really thought that I had caused those explosions, I would be still at large, let alone nominated governor? No! Which means that the man who gave you this information was deliberately trying to stir up trouble amongst us. No, one moment," as Korphu began to speak, "I realise the great delicacy of the situation, and I admit freely that I may have erred in various directions. What do you suggest that I should do?"

"THERE is . . . ah . . . something in what you say," said Korphu rather less confidently. "But we do feel," he turned to Phalar, who nodded emphatically, "that it would be as well for you to contact the . . . ah . . . enemy, and assure them that neither you nor the community intend any hostile acts, that you wish to co-operate. Then an atmosphere of friendliness and mutual

trust should develop in which further discussions between our . . . ah . . . representatives could take place with a view to settling our differences in an amicable manner—after all, there is no fundamental divergence of interests."

Snow felt vaguely that the right and proper answer to this was to vomit. He spoke slowly and carefully, pushing the words out one by one. "I will consider your suggestions most carefully," he said. "You must realise that for this I need time, since it means a considerable modification of our earlier policy. But I can give you an undertaking that I will call on the enemy commandant as soon as possible."

"I am relieved to hear it," boomed Korphu, "particularly, my dear Snow, as Phalar tells me that the . . . ah . . . enemy are considering sending for reinforcements."

Curiously, both men now seemed rather embarrassed and by no means anxious to prolong the interview. Rather hastily they excused themselves, and as they walked away their aura of self-importance was less visible than usual.

"I suppose it was as well to smooth them down," said Vara. "But I think it came too late. From their behaviour I think they've warned the Galnos that we're dangerous."

"Do you?" asked Snow dully. His mouth felt as if filled with a swelling mass of impalpable cotton-wool, and the landscape swayed about him.

"Snow, do stay awake for a moment," pleaded Vara. "If Korphu and Phalar have warned them that we're conspiring they're *certain* to have called Earth for reinforcements. And that means that if we let this stalemate go on, we're doomed. We *must* act."

"I suppose we must," Snow said, yawning. The words meant nothing to him. And then, abruptly, things were back in perspective. There were matters more important than sleep. "We must get control of the spacefield," he said. "If you're right, that's our only chance."

"Oh, I'm right," Vara said flatly.

"Then we must do two things, mutually incompatible as far as I can see. First, keep well out of the way, in case they think they'd better round us up—I'm surprised they haven't already—and second, find out what the defences of their camp are like."

"I'll do that," said Elm eagerly. "I expect they still think I'm on their side."

Snow snatched at this, though normally he might have hesitated. "Thank you, Elm. Don't get caught."

Elm snorted. "Can I have some of your stasitin melons, Vara?"

"What for?"

"Little idea."

Vara was too tired to pursue the subject, now that the main issue was settled. "Well, don't do anything silly," she said. "You'll find the plants

in the high-temperature room at the Biosynthesis Station. There should be several ripe ones by now."

Elm strode away up the hill. Amber, Vara, and Snow tottered into the woods and fell asleep almost before they could lie down.

WHEN Vara woke the other two, the sun was hanging close to the western horizon, and the shadows of the flame-trees, deep purple against the primrose evening light, were reaching toward them across the brook. Everything was very still.

"I didn't wake you earlier," explained Vara, "because there didn't seem to be any point in it. When the antherias were coming into full flower I stopped the growth, and there's nothing more we can do before it gets dark. And I'm sure *they* won't do anything aggressive until they get their reinforcements." She paused, and then added gravely, "Elm's back."

Snow sat up. "How did he get on?"

Elm spoke resentfully. "She thinks I've spoilt things. Well, she should have stopped me when I asked for the melons if she knew so much about it all. I thought it was a good idea."

"Tell me the worst."

"I just pushed a barrow of melons along the track by the camp as if I were taking them somewhere, and as I expected the guard came boiling out and commandeered them, barrow and all. And now"—a trace of a grin appeared—"I bet a good few of them are out of the way. I thought it was a pretty neat scheme," he finished angrily.

"But don't you see, Elm," said Snow, "you haven't destroyed them or anything like it, you've just put them more on their guard against the attempt we've got to make . . ." He took hold of himself. "Well, it was my fault. I shouldn't have let you go."

"I wish Anstar were here," said Elm gloomily. "He doesn't think I'm an idiot!"

"He doesn't"—Vara began, and then stopped herself. "Before we argue any more, let's have something to eat," she said, and produced a basket of fruit. "You won't like these—they're our new balanced invigorator, much better than vivik-seeds because there's some food in them, but we haven't got the taste right yet."

"I could eat anything!" Amber said, reaching out for one of the dull-green rough-surfaced things. "Do I peel it?"

"Oh *no*, Amber—the skin's almost the best part! You must eat the seeds too. They're a bit large and tough, but they taste a little better than the rest of it."

Amber made a wry face at the first bite, but when she had finished she jumped up springily, ran down to one of the pools and plunged into it, splashing and kicking until frothy wavelets were slapping sharply against the grassy bank.

Vara smiled. "Poor child, she's worried sick about Anstar, but of course she's *far* too proud to

say anything about it. How do you two feel?"

Snow shook himself. "Better," he said shortly. "And now, Elm, I've heard the negative part of your mission. What about the positive part, did you manage to find out anything about their defences?"

"Yes," said Elm sullenly. "Right round the outside there's a neutronium mesh carrying a current. I don't suppose the voltage is more than a thousand, but of course the amperage must be colossal. Then inside there are little semi-portable mortars that fire one-kilo atomite shells, high-fragmentation things. And in the middle there's the H.Q. and generator-shed, with other buildings stuck around—hangars and so on. They've probably got automatic weapons concealed there."

There was a discouraged silence. Then Snow said, "There must be a break at the gate, I suppose?"

"Yes—but of course that's heavily guarded." Angrily, Elm went on. "Well, what are you going to do about it? At least I've got at some of them, and I don't see it's fair to cuss me if you can't even do that."

"Give me time, Elm, and meanwhile, instead of grouching, you go and harvest your lichen-spores. They'll be ready by now, I imagine."

Elm strolled moodily up towards the Institute.

Vara frowned. "I'm afraid he's working up for another change of heart if something doesn't happen. Trouble is, he hasn't shown up very well, and he's frightfully young—*younger* still as a member of our community."

"The lichen'll keep him quiet. You know, Vara, you've become the leader since Anstar went—implicitly at least."

She smiled up at him from where she lay, head supported on clasped hands. "No, Snow dear, it's only . . . so far most of it's needed handling from the psychological side, and anyway, look at the way you dealt with those two traitorous pomposities."

"That was only on Anstar's precept; I was on the edge of roaring at them."

Her smile was teasing. "Your capacity for underrating yourself needs checking—still, to-night will show."

"A fiasco, I expect."

SHE shook her head as Amber came scampering up, the colour back in her cheeks and her hair tousled. "When do we start?" she demanded at once.

"D'you expect the four of us to walk up in broad daylight and call on them to surrender?" said Snow a little bitterly.

"But Snow—he's been there twenty-four hours now—they may have done *anything*."

"I think he's safer now than he was," Vara said. "You see, Garl and Siebel, who knew his importance are both out of the way, and now they've got a lot more captives, he's probably just one of them, undistinguished."

As she finished speaking, Elm came running down from the Institute. "I say!" he broke out anxiously, "Someone's left the neutronium shield off the mesotron-bombardment cell! D'you think it'll have hurt us?"

Amber had flushed. "That must have been me, I'm afraid. Last night. How awful—I've never done anything like that before! But we've kept well outside the cone. Only I'm awfully afraid that Korphu and Pharal—"

Elm burst into a shout of relieved laughter. "Well, it's bound to improve *their* offspring, the silly old windbags!"

Vara was smiling. "I don't think you need be so upset, Amber. Neither of those two are likely to father a child, so they need never know. We'll probably get a wild crop of plant mutations round here, though."

Snow was deep in thought. "Yes," he said finally. "That alters everything."

"What, Snow?" Amber asked anxiously.

"I can't tell you now." He straightened his shoulders with abrupt decision. "I must get into that camp at once. Elm!"

Automatically, at the incisive note of command, so foreign to Snow's usual manner, Elm sprang to attention. Then he flushed.

"Look, Elm," Snow went on more thoughtfully, but still as if his whole attention were, for once, bent on the present problem rather than straying to some distant music. "Their lighting—what does it consist of?"

"Searchlights, and I think overhead arcs just strung on wire."

"Is everything run off one generator?"

"I think so—it's all in one shed."

"What are the sheds made of?"

"Some kind of plastic, most of them."

"Yes . . . now, this lichen—are the spores ready?"

Elm nodded.

"Could you work them up into a paste with hormone and—salt, was it?—and glycerol or something to make it sticky?"

"I should think so."

"Good. Now suppose I started it on something soon after dark, what would it have done by morning?"

"I just don't know," said Elm. "Plenty of growth, I should think, and a good deal of surface corrosion. It might even eat through a thin steel plate in that time. And of course moving parts might be wrecked just by getting stray pieces in the bearings."

"Yes, I'm banking on that. Well, if you can run along and make me up some of that stuff—"

Elm trotted off obediently.

"HE seems to have simmered down again," said Snow.

"I'm afraid it was a throw-back to his time on Earth," Vara said. "Your parade-ground voice all of a sudden. But look, Snow, what is it you're going to do?"

"Get into the camp on some pretext—ask to see the Commandant, I should think—and distribute the lichen so that it gets a grip during the night."

"Snow, we can't let you—"

"I *must*, Vara. Obviously you girls can't do it, and Elm's too young and slapdash . . . and, as Siebel remarked, no one else is interested . . . at present."

"But suppose Korphu and Pharal have told them you're dangerous? Then they certainly won't let you out again, governor or no."

"I'm assuming they will keep me there. All the more time to plant the lichen."

"Oh Snow dear, I'm scared—the point is, *they're* scared, and you can't tell what they might do—and what are we to do without you?"

"A great deal. You'll be in command, and I want you to move all the antherias that are in flower up as near to the camp as you can safely get, as soon as it's dark. Get it done before moonrise if you can. Then wait. If the lichen works, it'll be not long before dawn; you'll know when, because all the lights'll go out. Then you can pull down a section of the mesh and get the flowers into strategic positions in the confusion. You see, I'm casting you for just as risky a part as mine."

"Suppose the lichen doesn't work?"

"Then we've got to find some other way of putting the generator out of action, and when it's done, you wait for dark and then go ahead with the flowers, improvising as required." He turned to Amber. "How long will they last—in pots or whatever you'll have them in?"

"A week at least. Anstar and I made up some special semi-permeable jars for that."

"But Snow, even supposing all this goes just as you plan, what then?" asked Vara. "When the second Earth force turns up, it's just as bad as ever."

"Don't you see, if only we can capture their headquarters, we'll be able to use their own communicators and codes—tell them we don't need them, or they can't land, or anything that'll keep them off *pro tem*."

"But we can't keep that up for long."

"I know. But"—worriedly—"I've got an idea, only it's not even worth discussing unless we control the camp and rescue Anstar, or at least, I'm not going to discuss it until I've thought about it rather more. Ah, here's Elm."

Elm came running up, carrying a flat quartz flask. "I've stuck a little brush in the neck," he said. "Much the easiest way of putting it on, if you can use it. Otherwise just slop it."

"Thanks, Elm," said Snow. He stowed the flask in a pocket, kissed Vara briefly, smiled at Amber, and said, "I'm going now—take care of yourselves! Elm, come along with me for a moment. I've got a special job for you—you're a bit of a mechanic, aren't you?"

The two men walked together to the edge of the glade, Snow talking quickly but quietly. They paused for a moment while Snow finished his explanation; then he went on alone into the gathering dusk.

VI

WHEN Snow came to the camp it was dark; neither of the moons would be up for two hours yet. But the camp itself was a blaze of light from the big overhead arcs on their primitive suspension. The gate was fairly heavily guarded; the rest of the long perimeter was presumably regarded as attack-proof, since it was not even patrolled.

Snow was stopped as he walked up to the gate by an advancing sentry with a large ugly-looking automatic weapon. "No natives allowed in or near the camp. Commandant Steinitz' orders," he said impersonally.

"I wish to see the Commandant on vital matters," said Snow, firmly.

"No natives allowed in or near the camp," repeated the man, without change of expression.

Snow cogitated, hastily shuffling the alternative plans he had been considering. "If I don't see him," he said finally, "your camp will be blown to pieces by a secret weapon before morning. I've come to warn him."

A faint flicker of some intellectual process came and went in the sentry's expression. "Wait," he said. "I will have your message given to the Commandant. Very likely he will have you shot. Do not move, or the guard will shoot you." He swung stiffly about and marched over towards the group of buildings in the middle of the encampment. He sounds, Snow thought, like a burst of fire from his own gun.

While he waited, Snow had time to sort out the topography of the camp. The structure of steel plates in the middle was obviously headquarters. Of the sheds around it the one to the left housed the generator: for its doors stood open, and a tangle of cable disappeared within. Over at the back, the four long low plastic sheds would be the hangars. The other metal building was by itself, well over to the left, and particularly well illuminated; it must be the prison-shed. The main group of buildings were surrounded by a ring of mortars, and more of these were placed at intervals round the perimeter. From slits in the walls of the headquarter's building protruded the barrels of weapons of some kind. Except for the group of guards at the gate there seemed to be no one about, and Snow surmised that there must be alarms, photoelectric type probably. Near the hangars the concreted area was being extended, and a small blast-furnace was the explanation of the red glow they had seen from the hillside. One thing was at once apparent—the way to the headquarters, if he were taken there, did not lie past the generator;

but if from headquarters he was sent on to the prison-shed, he might have a chance.

The sentry was returning, marching stiffly and staring straight before him. He drew up with a snap at the gate and beckoned Snow in with his gun. "The Commandant will see you," he said unemotionally.

Snow followed him, slightly surprised that he had not been searched. Now that the crisis was near he felt completely detached; the whole business was unreal, an intellectual game. The cause of this, he decided as they reached headquarters, must be the wholly foreign scene: the tawdry glare of the arcs, giving an unpleasant colour to the dusty trampled grass; the ugly utilitarian buildings and the weapons; the robot-like behaviour of the men.

At the entrance to headquarters he was turned over to a second sentry, who searched him, finding the quartz flask almost at once.

"My throat-medicine," Snow said blandly, holding out his hand for it.

The man sniffed at it, shook it, and finally handed it back. "Under the New Order your illnesses will be cured," he said, permitting himself a slight sneer. He opened the door and motioned Snow in.

He found himself in a room furnished only with a desk and a chair, in which sat a smallish dark man, pale and bleak of countenance, forehead bulging over bright restless eyes and a pinched little down-drawn mouth. When he spoke his voice was harsh but high-pitched.

"Your name?"

"Snow—my appointment as governor of the planet has been ratified by the Council."

"All such appointments are suspended during the present emergency. State your business."

"A minority faction of our people, using a new type of weapon, have, as you may be aware, been carrying out a series of raids on your personnel capturing Commandant Garl and Dr. Siebel. They are now planning to attack and destroy your encampment."

"Why have you come to tell me this? And what is the method of attack?"

"These people have developed a new type of ultra-atomic explosive, a small grain of which has a blasting power equal to that of several kilos of atomite. It can be detonated from a distance by suitable electromagnetic frequencies. You will realise the implications: already your plans are disorganised and you have been forced to ask for a punitive contingent."

SNOW could see that Commandant Steinitz was seriously perturbed by this, and wondered if he had pitched it too strong: it was no part of his plan to frighten the occupying force into precipitate retreat, with an accompaniment of scare-calls to Earth. The Commandant's eyes darted to and

fro, and his hands frenziedly crumbled and smoothed out a piece of paper.

"You have not answered my first question," he said, finally.

"The answer is simply that most of us have agreed to co-operate with you to avoid bloodshed, which is highly repugnant to us. We cannot let the irresponsible activities of a minority bring harm to us all. To be associated with the killing of fellow-men we regard as unforgivable." At least, thought Snow, that bit must sound genuine. But it seemed to have the opposite effect on Steinitz.

"You are lying," he said raspingly. "Three things tell me that. One, I have been warned about you. Two, the disappearance of Garl and Siebel was associated with your villa, as reported by Siebel's guard-squad. Three, your very presence here, armed with what purport to be the inner councils of your rebel group. If the situation is as you say you could not know of this plan, and even if in some way you did, it would be obvious that this warning would be of no use."

"It would give you a chance to escape in your ships."

Steinitz laughed mirthlessly. "I regret to inform you that you have fallen into an elementary trap," he said. "Your reaction to my last remark shows that not only are you yourself a member of this rebel group, but also you are aware that your weapon is not as efficient as you pretended, probably not efficient enough to overcome the camp. Hence your earlier puerile and quite abortive attempt to drug my personnel; and now your first line of attack revealed so ingenuously—to try and frighten us into leaving; your second, to return with a report of our dispositions so that you will have the maximum chance of success. You have failed in both."

Snow tensed himself to prevent his relief from becoming apparent. He was helped by his persistent conviction of the unreality of the whole business; none the less a warm glow of triumph suffused him, triumph at winning another man's game. Even Vara could hardly have done better, he thought analytically, the man's convinced that the one thing I want least is to stay here; all I have to do now is avoid being shot out of hand. He became aware that Steinitz was speaking again.

"It can do no harm to tell you that within twenty-four hours my force will be withdrawn in preparation for a comprehensive gas-attack by a strong squadron now on its way from Earth. If your little attack develops before then it will fail, and we will have the pleasure of shooting you with the other hostages. Otherwise you will simply be left to your own devices. You will now join the other prisoners."

Snow relaxed. For the moment the impending gas-attack seemed remote and inconsequent in

comparison with this victorious skirmish. He spoke woodenly to conceal his exultation.

"And Garl and Siebel?"

"They, by being captured, have shown their inefficiency and will share your fate." The Commandant eyed him keenly. "You are remarkably unperturbed by these developments."

Snow made a weary gesture. "So much has happened in the last few days," he said resignedly, "that nothing perturbs me now."

"Then you admit your complicity?"

"Oh yes," said Snow disinterestedly. His chief emotion was gladness that it was not the perceptive Siebel he was facing.

Steinitz summoned the guard and turned Snow over to him. As he was thrust out of the doorway, Snow managed to turn the quartz flask on its side in his pocket and work the brush loose so that a gob of the sticky stuff poured into his hand. In a moment they were passing the generator shed, and he contrived to stumble, throwing out his hands to save himself, and saw a clot of Elm's composition land on one of the condenser tubes of the big generator. The guard prodded him viciously with something sharp; but in his exaltation he hardly noticed it.

He felt now the crisis of his visit to the camp was past, nothing that happened there could affect him very much. He changed his mind as soon as the door of the prison-hut was opened and he was pushed roughly in, to a heat and a stench and a darkness such as a civilised being simply could not have conceived. On his entry some of the prisoners called apathetically for water; some moaned; from most came merely an uneasy rustle, like the stirring of a nest of large insects at a stimulus. And most of these, he thought, were people like me hardly twelve hours ago. For the first time during the brief struggle he had a real appreciation of what he was fighting; the haze of unreality dropped from his outlook, and the moral problem which faced him received a fresh twist.

WITH a sudden sharp fear he called "Anstar!"

A surge of relief, and surprise, for the voice that answered him was almost as steady and strong as he remember it.

"Why Snow! This is a surprise!"

Snow began to fumble his way towards where Anstar must be sitting, against one of the walls, probably. Almost at once he stepped on something that yielded unpleasantly, like raw rubber—a hand whose owner was unresponsive. "Where are you, Anstar?" he called shakily.

"Here." The answer came from almost beneath him, the voice fainter now, but still edged with the old note of mockery.

Snow wedged himself down by the wall as best he could in the thick noisome darkness. He was relieved to find the air a little better near the ground. "My lord, Anstar!" he said chokingly, "this is

"I've never imagined such things . . . we've hardly even worried about you."

"Oh, you get used to it," Anstar said almost lightly. "My reading prepared me for worse than this." After a short silence he added, "Amber—she's all right?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad she won't ever know about this. It'd upset her."

"How is it you've stood it so much better than most of these, even though you've been here longer?"

"Many of them have been beaten up, but the real reason is that they've given up hope. A lot of the cruiser's crew are here, and they've convinced everyone that the Council's all-powerful. I'm afraid the fact that most of them gave up so easily is an acid comment on our civilisation. However," his voice strengthened again, "I'm not entirely hopeless. What is the situation—I assume you're here as part of a plan?"

Snow gave him a brief survey of the last two days.

"I wondered why I'd seen no more of Siebel," Anstar said at the end. "You've done astonishingly well, you know."

"Helped by a lot of luck."

"You've had bad luck too—your villa, and Korphu and Pharal." After a moment he added, "But I don't quite see how things stand now. If the lichen plan works, how much better off are we?"

"We'll control the field and its ultra-transmitters. We can pretend we're Siebel or some one and tell them we don't need them after all."

"You can assess the chances of success that idea has as well as I can. In any case it looks as if they may be hovering overhead, Black Cross and all, before we do control the field. No, Snow, it's shouting through all you've said—there's some other factor, something powerful, that you've come across but you don't know how it's going to operate. Am I right?"

"I suppose so," Snow said slowly. "But there's no use discussing it now."

"You're hoping it won't have any chance to operate?"

"No—it's not that. I'm giving it a fair chance. It's the responsibility. I *must* think it out first."

Anstar said nothing for a moment. When he did speak his voice had changed a little. There was something in it Snow had never heard there before—an appeal, almost a confession of weakness. Very quietly he said, "You haven't a little water, I suppose?"

"Anstar—I'm such an unimaginative fool—I could have brought—"

"Don't tell me," Anstar broke in. "I've imagined everything." His tone was normal once more, and Snow guessed what an effort the appeal had cost him. For a while neither of them spoke. Then Anstar said, "That stuff you've got, Elm's lichen, won't it work on the walls of this place?"

"Lord! I'd forgotten all about it. Of course!" He began slopping the sticky stuff on to the walls, stumbling over prostrate men too apathetic to protest. Finally he returned to Anstar and crouched down to try and rest.

WHEN he woke it was to a scene so strange that at first it seemed a continuation of his dreams. Light was filtering through the walls in many places, a queer reddish light, and the shed was pervaded with a rustling hiss which seemed to come from everywhere at once. The air, in spite of the apparent presence of many new ventilation-holes, was fouler if anything than it had been. He tried to move, and found something immediately above his head which stopped him, a sort of bracket of some rubbery stuff.

"What's happened?" he asked dazedly.

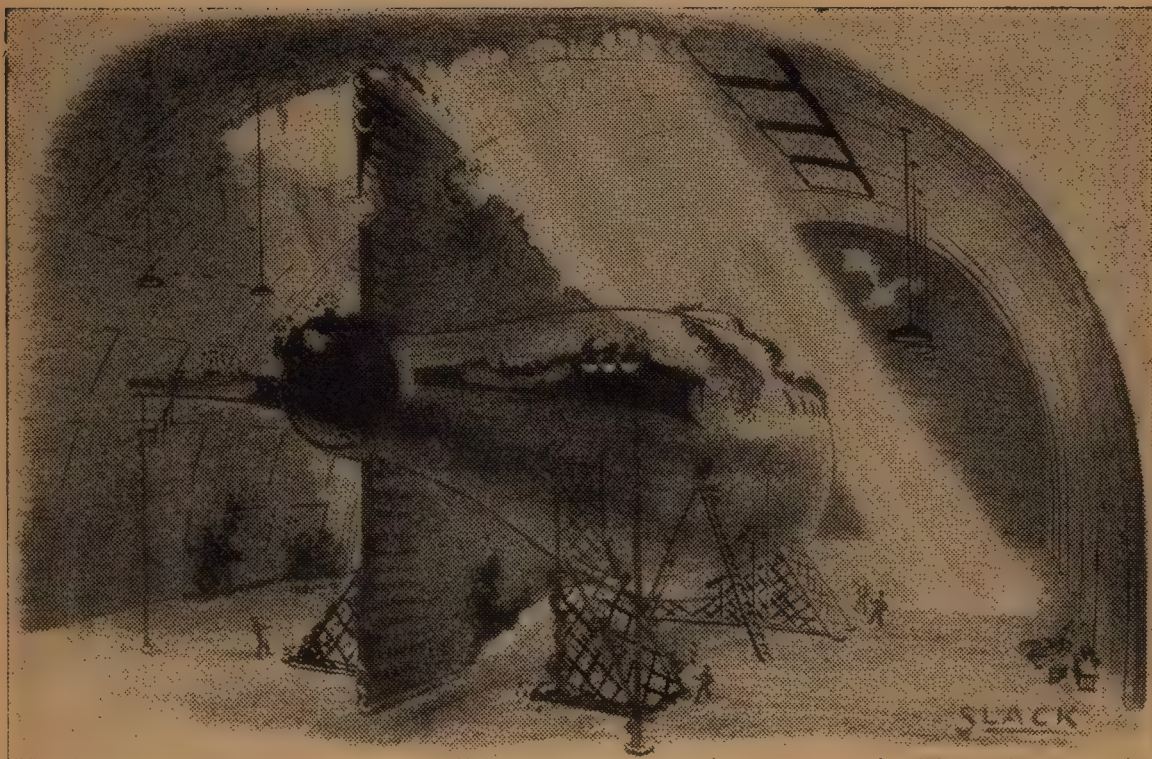
Anstar's voice was very tired. "You missed the best of it—it's that damned lichen, of course. The whole shed's full of it, and it's used up most of the oxygen. In fact if it hadn't begun to get through the walls I don't know whether we could have lasted."

"But what's happened outside? Is it daylight? Is the generator still running?"

Anstar called upon some reserve of the sardonic. "I can't see from here," he said, "and I don't feel strong enough to tear down all this stuff that's grown around me in the night. But it's been quite quiet after a little commotion about four hours ago. Suppose you go and look."

Snow pushed violently against the fleshy shelf of lichen above him. It yielded springily, but it was difficult to get much of a purchase, and when he relaxed it returned to its former position. Even this brief effort had made him breathless and his hands slippery with sweat, and he returned more cautiously to the attack. He managed to work his head round one side of the thing, got a bent arm and then a shoulder under it, and heaved. The great plant bent upwards more and more, and he worked his feet under him and put all his strength into one final heave. There was a crack, everything gave way, and he fell out into a dazzling blaze of hot sunlight. A whole section of the wall, worn almost paper-thin, had fallen out with him. For a moment he was dazed, and lay where he had fallen. Then he picked himself up and looked around. And was content to stand, lost in the serene, ineffable beauty of the great splendid blue blossom that stood near at hand. Vaguely he was aware of other men around him, of the hot sun and the sweet fresh air. Later perhaps there would be things he must attend to, but for now this was enough, this was peace, *this* was the solution of the problem that tortured his mind.

WHEN Amber woke, lozenges of strong sunlight were chequering the floor of the long room at the



Institute. She looked across at Vara, still sleeping ; she felt no great sense of urgency, for the enemy must by now be immobilised. And it was wonderful to lie, only half-awake, really resting for the first time in a week, and know that the crisis was past. Soon Anstar would come, when he and Snow had finished disposing of the Galno prisoners. Details of the night's work drifted into her mind—the slow labour of carrying the plants, one at a time in their heavy jars, racing against moonrise. Oh yes, she wondered suddenly, what has Elm been up to ? Some special job for Snow, he'd said, insufferably mysterious, and gone off to the elec. workshop. How marvellous it had been when, after eons of waiting, listening, watching the slow march of shadows against the magic of green moonlight, the lights of the camp really had gone out, the hum of the generator had risen to a shriek and abruptly stopped. In the comparative darkness the Galnos had scurried around, completely at a loss, firing mortars blindly in all directions, waving improvised hand-lamps, and finally setting off a whole dump of flares which must have had them completely dazzled by the time they burnt out. Elm had been very quick, she admitted. He had joined them ten minutes after the lights went out, and had soon found a chance to pull down a long section of the neutronium mesh, a completely broken reed once the power was off. It had been amazingly easy to place the plants against walls, along the perimeter, anywhere where they wouldn't

get knocked about in the first confusion. Most of them were in position before order began to be restored and Vara called a halt. As the three retreated the camp was quiet once more, and unlit save by the flickering glow from the still-burning dump and the moonlight paling before the dawn.

Suddenly feeling she wanted to talk, Amber called softly, "Vara !"

Instantly Vara was awake, sitting up. "Lord !" she said. "It must be nearly noon, mustn't it ? I must have been nearly dead—I've never slept through my own control before !" Already she was up, hastily washing, combing back her shining hair.

"But there's no hurry, is there ?" Amber said, slowly.

Vara's voice was almost rough with amazement. "But the troops from Earth, Amber, they could arrive to-day ! And anything may have happened to Snow and Anstar, we've not won yet, as you seem to think !"

"Oh, Snow and Anstar will be here soon, I should think. They'd have to do a lot of organising before they could leave the field. And those reinforcements—it's only your idea that they've even sent for them. And if they have, Snow said we could just tell them to go away, in their own code."

"You know *nothing* about people, Amber. They *must* have sent for them. Remember, Phalar said they were considering it yesterday morning,

probably meaning they'd already done it. And I can tell you, we've very little chance of persuading them to go away without even an inspection, once they get here."

"Well, what's the good of doing anything, then?" Amber said angrily. "We may just as well sit here as go to the field."

"I believe you're afraid to meet Anstar again," said Vara, giving her a keen look. "You are a strange unpredictable pair. I wish you'd hurry up and live together. For one thing, it'd reduce the mean argument density here by fifty per cent."

Amber was composed once more. "We're a living proof that you can't prophesy about individual human behaviour," she said. "That's why I prefer the nonhuman sciences."

"You're *quite* as infuriating as he is. It'd do you both no end of good."

"But look, Vara," Amber said gravely. "What is the use of doing any more, if it's as you say? It seems to me we're just beaten."

"Yes." There was a queer sense of strain about Vara's tone. "Except—the thing Snow and Elm were discussing." She shook herself as if to dismiss some foreboding. "Where will Elm be? I'll go and wake him."

"He was in the elec. when we came up."

"Here." Vara tossed her one of the green fruits. "Eat that, and do hurry and get up."

WHEN Vara opened the door of the little laboratory Elm was sitting on a stool at a bench, his chin in his hands. He smiled a little haggardly.

"It's finished."

"Haven't you slept at *all*, Elm?"

He shook his head.

"What is it you're doing?"

"Don't know myself exactly. Anyway Snow told me not to tell even you about it." He pointed along the bench. "There it is, anyway."

A little neutronium tube with a vernier control and a simple optical sight, trailing a massive ultra-insulated cable which ran along the floor and out of the room.

"A *weapon*, is it?"

Elm shrugged. "I'm so tired I'm not interested any more, even in winning." He lifted one of his hands and waved it ponderously. "See, it weighs nearly a ton."

"You go and sleep, Elm, we can get on without you. Only we must hurry."

He got up staggeringly. "Think I will . . . done my job. . . ." His voice trailed off, and abruptly he sat down again at the bench, pillowed his head on an arm, and was asleep.

EVEN prepared as they were for a bizarre scene, Vara and Amber were taken aback by the spacefield. For everything was quiet there: a red haze of spores hung in the still air, and most of the buildings

were completely hidden by fantastically convoluted mounds of rampant scarlet lichen, like pile of squirming worm-creatures suddenly arrested. A few of the plastic sheds were still free, but the mortar sites were marked only by smaller clumps of red; every now and then a fresh cloud of spores was discharged into the air. And all around sat or stood little groups of men, gazing raptly at the great blue flowers.

"But where are Anstar and Snow, why has nothing started?" Amber demanded wildly.

"I'm terribly afraid—," Vara began slowly, but was interrupted by Amber's cry of "There's Snow! Of course, he wasn't immune!" She rushed across to him and pulled him roughly away. "Snow, quickly, where's Anstar?"

By degrees the dreary cold-light-of-dawn look faded from Snow's face. "Amber!" he said. "What . . . lord! Anstar! He's buried under all that lichen, with the rest of the prisoners!"

Feverishly they wrestled with the mound of vegetation that had been the prison-shed. Amber, beside herself, was murmuring Anstar's name over and over again, and hardly seemed to see what she was doing, for often her fingers merely plucked at the air. When Anstar's voice came faintly from beneath them she heard neither it nor Snow's gasp of relief, but went on automatically picking at the fronds.

"Amber!" Anstar repeated. "Is it you?"

Vara took Amber's hand. "Amber, don't you hear? It's Anstar!"

Slowly the dazed, lost look left Amber's face, and she began to pull herself together. She said shakily, "I suppose it was silly of me—I suppose there was no danger really—but I—I'd no idea . . ."

When they finally got Anstar out, pallid and unkempt, he smiled at them, his old strange smile, and fainted into Amber's arms.

Hours later rescuers were still toiling over the festering ruddy heap in which some of the prisoners yet remained, asphyxiated by carbon dioxide. The bemused Galnos had been given a narcotic and taken away. Anstar lay with his head in Amber's lap, watching blue-black clouds, edged with stormy white, gather and pile up in the west.

"The fine weather looks like ending."

"Anstar darling, how can you be so calm when they may come just *any* time with their filthy Black Cross!"

"Well, we've won all—"

"Here are Snow and Vara," she broke in. "Any luck, Snow?"

Snow shook his head dispiritedly. "Can't get one of the transmitters to work, even the ones in the ships. The wretched lichen's got at all of them."

"It's hardly fair to blame it," Anstar said, lightly. "It did its job successfully. Trouble is, we didn't stop it from going too far."

"Ironical, isn't it?" went on Snow, who had hardly listened. "One of the receivers is still working perfectly. We've been getting messages from the Earth fleet at ten-minute intervals, telling Steinitz to evacuate before eighteen o'clock, and demanding a reply."

"What'll they do if there isn't one?" asked Amber.

"Go straight ahead with the Black Cross," Anstar said. "Strange, isn't it? We've won in such a way that we've lost."

"Another hour and a-half," said Vara. "Snow, isn't it time you told us about your idea?" Her tone was strange, strained, as if she did not know whether to be hopeful or afraid.

"I suppose I can't really delay telling you any longer," said Snow slowly. "When Elm comes—where is he, by the way, Vara?"

"Asleep in the elec.—he finished whatever it is first, though."

"Finished! Lord, I'd no idea it could be done so quickly! Oh well, then—it's a weapon—one which makes our present victory secure." He spoke flatly, looking at the ground.

"I knew," said Vara tensely. "A weapon which will destroy the Earth fleet at a distance?"

"I believe so," said Snow dully.

Anstar spoke with his usual detached coolness. "Before we embark on the ethical discussion which I see looming ahead, will you tell us what it is?"

"It's simply an adaptation of your mesotron beam, only instead of focussing it I'm using a parallel beam. The range at full strength is practically infinite, unless there happens to be neutronium in the way, and at present the Galnos don't keep their atomite in neutronium containers. Amber's the discoverer, of course, by leaving the shield off the bombardment-chamber."

"Of course—the explosions!" exclaimed Anstar, sitting up.

"But why don't all kinds of things—cosmics—set it off?" asked Amber.

"Cosmics are too infrequent to get it over the potential barrier, and there's nothing else sufficiently heavy to set it off and sufficiently penetrating to get through the casings they use—except here."

"Well, what are we waiting for, what is there to discuss?" said Amber with rising impatience. "Surely there's no question that we're going to use it, is there, on those subhuman beasts who—"

"Steady, Amber dear," said Anstar. "What does Snow say?"

"I DON'T know," said Snow without lifting his eyes. "When I first had the idea the excitement of it made me forget the other side, the horrible destruction—and when I thought of that, for a while I couldn't even face the idea of letting the thing be made. And then, it seemed to me that I couldn't sentence us all without even telling you, so I started Elm on it, hoping perhaps he wouldn't

have time to finish it. When I saw what they'd done to the prisoners I hoped he *would* have time. Oh, I don't *know*." He buried his face in his hands.

"You wouldn't have bothered to get Elm to make it if you'd had a real conviction that it mustn't be used," said Amber.

"Snow," Vara said quietly, but with such agony in her voice that Snow looked round at her quickly, startled out of his stupor of indecision. "I'll never live with you again if you do it. I could never speak to or even *look* at anyone who'd done such a thing, a cold-blooded slaughter of thousands of deluded men. Spiritually we'd never recover, we'd be as bad as they—"

"You'll never live with him again if he *doesn't* use it," broke in Amber, a fierce sob in her voice.

"Hush, Amber," said Anstar. "We must look at this logically, and decide on the basis of what we are and what we want to be. And then, I think, we'll find that the campaign was lost, as far as people like us were concerned, from the moment that Elm gave away an essential of the plan. From then they were forewarned of organised resistance; and violence, leading to more and greater violence, became a virtual necessity. If Garl and Siebel hadn't had their private quarrel, if Amber's slip hadn't destroyed those two Galno parties—both things the merest luck for us—we couldn't have lasted even these few days. The plan, the only plan for us, failed. Intellectually I've known that ever since Elm's confession, but emotions aren't so easy to convince."

Amber was on her feet, white and shaking. "Oh, you're so smug," she raged. "You take it on yourself to seal the fate of our whole race, to turn the galaxy over to barbarians who'll never be more than barbarians just so your hands'll be kept pure." She whirled on Vara, "And you, with all your psychological training, can't you see that you're just suffering from an upbringing-pattern that says Thou Shalt Not Kill, and you're following it blindly?" She turned fiercely back to Anstar. "Without asking all those," she swept her hand round the people who were still tending to the prisoners lately freed, "you'd sacrifice them all for an idea that isn't even right, all our bright happy future that might be the saving of the galaxy, without even consulting the people you're supposed to be acting for." Her brilliant hair wildly framing her pearly-white face, she made a wonderful picture, poised against the mass of threatening storm-cloud. "It's a question of survival of the fittest," she went on more quietly. "Are we just going to confirm *their* opinion of us, that we're an effete civilisation not fitted to survive? *Can't* you see, they may have more brute-will to survive, but if we have the means we *owe* it to the future, even if it does mean spiritual ruin for ourselves." Her voice trailed away, and for a moment there was silence.

THE great thunderheads had mounted higher, and a prolonged threatening rumble broke across the hushed air.

"What does Elm think?" said Vara at last. "He's Earth-born. He—why, he's not here!" she went on surprisedly. "I thought—I was sure he'd come up and stood just there while we were talking."

"That's queer," said Snow. "I thought there were five of us here—not Elm particularly, just someone else."

The growl of thunder was almost continuous now, and greenish lightning played over the mammoth cloud that was heaving itself up the sky. On the spacefield the sun still shone, but the light had an eerie quality, the colour of the grass seemed strange.

Amber spoke softly, moving across to Anstar and looking up at him. "Forgive me, dear Anstar," she said. "It's . . . we've been *us* for such a short time that made me . . . but I see you're right really."

Anstar smiled as he stroked and smoothed back her hair. "I'm glad, Amber darling," he said.

As the rain began to fall the little group drew together. Somehow it seemed not worth sheltering. All four felt that the crisis would be upon them too soon for such things to matter.

"Old Nature's on our side," Anstar said, as the first big drops came pattering down. "This is going to be the biggest storm we've had for years." As if his remark had been a signal, the storm

burst upon them, rain spiking densely down and rebounding from the concrete; the forest whitening as the wind caught it, a momentary lightning-lit glimpse; and then a bewildering fury of wind and rain, a roaring darkness savagely transfixed by searing flashes, one on top of the other. And then, above the rage of the storm itself came a more furious and steady roar, the sound of a great fleet of ships changing into rocket-drive.

Anstar raised a hand, in defiance, acceptance, or farewell; but again as if at his signal, a ferocious violet glare burst from the sky, through even the blanketing dark of the storm. Pulsing and fading, unbearably brilliant, it lasted nearly a minute, and was succeeded by a stupendous series of explosions which made even the great storm seem insignificant.

As if released from a hypnotic trance, the four were now running, buffeted and deafened, towards the shelter of one of the sheds that still stood. As they crowded into the doorway, and comparative silence fell, Vara gasped, "I *knew* Elm had been there. He must have heard most of what we said, and foreseen the end of the argument."

"So," said Anstar, "we're saved *pro tem*, in spite of ourselves, by the will to survive of an enemy-born ally."

"No," said Vara positively, very sadly. "Not by his will to survive. For I am sure, as sure as I have ever been of any human action, that Elm is dead—by his own hand."

EDITORIAL

WE APOLOGISE most profoundly to all our readers who have been wondering when this issue of New Worlds would appear. Probably no magazine issue has been beset by so many obstacles since it went into production, almost all of them in the technical departments. In the main, we were caught by the power cuts and have only just managed to recover. Like yourselves, we hope this won't happen again.

With this issue we have decreased the price of the magazine to 1s. 6d. while still retaining the same number of pages, although for a while we had hoped to increase the issue by eight pages. However, we felt that the popular price would be more welcome.

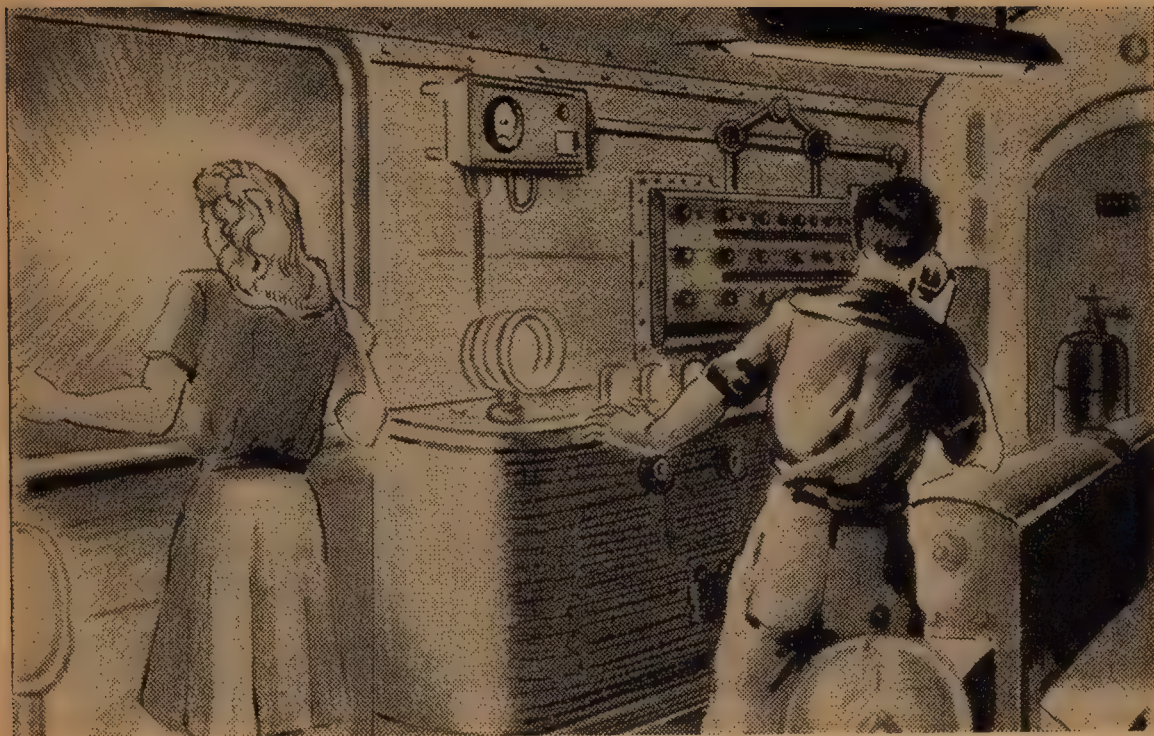
Elsewhere in this issue we have inaugurated a simple form of competition which has as its main objective finding out your story preference for this issue. We hope that you will help us found the policy of this magazine—at a cost to you of a few minutes work and a postage stamp. Will you do it **now** and not "to-morrow"?

It is with regret that we pass on the belated news of the death of author Maurice Hugi, who passed away earlier this year at the age of 43. His story in this issue is one of the last he wrote and its theme is rather significant as Maurice himself knew that he had less than a year to live. Having been writing science fiction for thirteen years his passing is a sad blow to this country and we shall miss his jovial personality as much as his writings.

For the benefit of readers who like to know what is happening in the world of science fiction we thoroughly recommend "Fantasy Review," a neatly printed 16-page magazine which adequately covers both the book and magazine fields in this country and America. You will find all the advance news of New Worlds there, plus interesting features about authors and publications.

Finally, if you missed either of the first two issues of this magazine, there are still a few copies available. In any case, don't miss No. 4.

THE EDITOR.



THE TERRIBLE MORNING

BY NICK BODDIE WILLIAMS

When a star exploded into a super-nova too near the Universe, it spread more than panic across the face of the Earth—only lead walls could save sanity

I WAS in the laboratory when my wife Jane came walking into this flat of ours with Hobey Ames. I didn't want to look at my watch, but I couldn't help it. It was two o'clock in the morning.

The lab walls are made of lead-glass, so that no cosmic rays except those coming through the recording shaft can get in to gum up the frequency readings. You can see through the walls, but not very clearly. What you see is distorted and blurred, and people look like goldfish in a bowl. Maybe I hated those walls once, but I love them now. Maybe I never loved Lorna, Jane's Scotty bitch, either; but now she can even sleep on my feet.

The way I remember it, Hobey waved at me, as if to say: Why, there's poor old Professor Mize. Jane's gloved hand made a motion casually. I could see the way this Hobey Ames held onto Jane's arm, and the way she let him do it, and knowing what I knew—Jane had told me about the dates they'd had while I was stuck for the duration in that meteorology station in Greenland—it cooked me through, the way a roast gets it on a spit.

Suddenly the buzzer sounded on our private three-way telephone. The chief, Doctor Alfred

Donner of Mount Wilson Observatory, was making the final call of our routine day.

"Hello, Gelhaus. Hello, Mize. Frequency of cosmic rays fractionally above normal at Mount Wilson at 2 a.m. Sky here cloudless. Temperature 59 degrees. I'm going to bed. Call you at 7 a.m."

Then Bob Gelhaus' voice came from our station at Redondo Beach:

"Cosmic ray frequency at Redondo normal. Temperature, 68. Humidity at 33."

I spoke my piece. "This is Frank Mize, reporting with the very latest data from downtown Los Angeles, corner of First and Broadway—"

"Can't you put it in song?" Bob Gelhaus asked.

"Rays 72," I said, ignoring him. "Temperature 73. And I've got a bellyful of this. When do I get that relief?"

"Relief, relief. Who gets relief?" Gelhaus asked.

"All right, clown," I said. "Shut up. I'm talking to Donner."

THE chief lit into me. Sitting like Jove up there on Mount Wilson, he always gave his punks—Gelhaus

and me—the take-it-easy routine when we started beefing. “Cut it out, Mize. I know you’re bored. I’m bored myself. Nothing up here for laughs but Kiesel giggling through the Big Eye. Says he feels something spooky shaping up out there to-night.”

I could imagine that—Kiesel, squatty and bald, glued to the tail-end of that rooin. telescope while Halley’s Comet looped the loop. “You really kill me, Chief,” I said. “But I want that relief.”

“Listen, Mize. You stick for one more week. Then you can rot in Palm Springs till you die.”

“This little chat is being recorded,” I pointed out. “I’ll confirm that promise in the wax.”

“Things are looking up here,” Gelhaus cut in. “Been watching grunion hunters on the beach. So comes along a babe clad in a skin-tight web of mesotrons and neutrons who completely paralyses me——”

The chief made sounds. It was as near a raspberry as a Nobel Prize man ever makes. “Think of her, Gelhaus, as so much calcium and hydrogen and silicon. It helps.”

“Helps what?” asked Gelhaus.

I hung up. They’d keep that up for half-an-hour not giving a rap that everything they said was going in the automatic wax recording of whatever came across our three-way line. It’d be a treat to hear that played before the American Philosophical Society, but right then what was on my mind was in the kitchenette.

I made another check before I left. It was the same, normal for June. The lead-proofed lab was built into the dump the chief had picked out there at First and Broadway, facing the Civic Center. Gelhaus gave us readings at Redondo’s sea level, I got readings under downtown conditions and Donner got them at Mount Wilson’s six thousand feet. I’ll say this much, the chief had fixed a decent flat for us, considering the budget that he had for it. But I knew Jane was sick of it. Twenty-four-hour duty, six long months, no dough to speak of, but a first-class chance to break into the scientific big time. I had explained to Jane exactly what it meant to us when I came back from Greenland and the war. She’d been hot for it then. But—well, there was this Hobeys Ames.

They were sitting in the kitchenette, Jane in a chair and Hobeys perching on the sink with a highball. Not too much room in there. Hobeys was big enough to crowd it even more. A tall man, lean, tanned to a manicurist’s taste, a splash of grey around his temples. You’ll find a dozen of him any day around the Racquet Club, the guys who have the gift of getting hold of something that produces plenty of cash without much sweat. Hobeys had been in rockets while the war was on. Now it was plastics. Or it was Jane. I think that he was working hardest at Jane.

“How is it by those rays of yours?” he asked.

“It’s fine by them,” I said.

Jane’s grey eyes watched me carefully. And right then, I got scared. I poured myself a drink, taking my time at mixing it, but I was scared. Jane hadn’t said a word but she was watching me. I wondered if she knew how jittery I was.

“Just had a talk with Donner,” I said finally. “In one more week, I’m through with this.”

“That’s nice,” said Hobeys. “Don’t you think so, Jane?”

“Is it?” she said. She kept on watching me.

I said, “Where’ve you two been?”

It was the wrong thing to say. Something uneasy came into Hobeys’s eyes. Jane gave me a sneer.

“You mean,” she said, “you actually missed us?”

“Jane thought we might as well be dancing while you worked,” Hobeys put in.

“Somebody’s got to take me off your hands,” Jane said.

“I’ll take you off his hands,” grinned Hobeys.

“Any time.”

“Listen,” I said, “you two——”

THE buzzer sounded in the lab. Not once, as in routine, but steadily, insistently. Hobeys was putting down his drink.

“Your little playmates want you,” Jane said carefully.

“Listen to me,” I said. And then I choked it off. If she’d made up her mind about Hobeys, if she knew what she meant to do, I wasn’t getting anywhere by blowing up now. I stood there thinking about that and hearing that buzzer jumping off the wall.

“Go on,” Jane said. “Science calls.”

I turned sharply around and walked away from them, into the lab. I picked up the ‘phone. It was Donner’s voice.

“Frank! Frank!”

I answered him.

“Ray frequency has suddenly jumped eight points. But temperature and humidity are still normal for the hour,” he said. “You know, that makes that jump in frequency damned queer, and kind of spooky, too. What do you get?”

“I thought you were going to bed,” I said.

“I couldn’t sleep. Check your recorder, Frank.”

I went to the recorder shaft. The jiggling red line had risen vertically. I ran back to the ‘phone.

“Up seven points here, Chief.”

“The hell you say! Then it’s not my machine that’s out of whack. Can’t raise Gelhaus. Him and his grunion hunters on the beach! Confound——”

“Hello, hello——” It was Bob Gelhaus cutting in on the three-way ‘phone. “Donner on the line? Say, Chief, ray frequency has jumped five points here at Redondo since 2 a.m. Five points in little better than an hour. That’s fast. What is it, Chief?”

“We’ll wait a while and see. You birds go back to bed, I’ll sit with this. Check your recorders at 7 a.m. and call me then.”

I didn't want to go back to the kitchenette. Not yet. For when I did, something was going to pop. I wanted Hobey to get out of there. I wanted to see Jane alone and have it out. And Hobey hadn't left.

"I can't sleep now," I lied. "I'll stick."

"Me, too," Bob Gelhaus said. "I'd like to know the reason for that five-point jump."

"Suit yourselves," the chief said in that bland drawl of his. "You know, we're having fun up here. Kiesel believes he sees a supernova being born. Four of his stooges are standing around him like a cheering section. Every now and then they run in here and gibber! Very gay."

"Supernova?" Gelhaus said. "Wish I was there. I get a bang, watching those big stars blossom suddenly in the sky. Remember that one back two years ago, the quickie that blew up so fast?"

Donner laughed. "Kiesel still kicks himself for missing that."

"How fast is it exploding?" I snapped.

"About a thousand kilometres a second, Kiesel thinks. He's probably got the Big Eye on the airplane beacon on the city hall down there."

"Where's he think it is?"

"Hasn't had time to figure yet. Says it looks like it's in the polar region on the Milky Way, like that last one, but maybe closer in."

"You observatory guys," Bob Gelhaus said, "have all the fun."

"How about your grunion-hunting babe?"

"Hell, Chief, I put a telescope on her. She probably inspired the basic contour of the cyclotron."

There was a lull. I started across to look at my recorder. Something snagged my foot and I fell flat. It was Lorna, Jane's Scotty. She squealed indignantly at me. I wanted to kick her in the teeth. I didn't, though. Kind of dumb animals, that's Mize. I looked at my recorder. Then I ran back to the telephone.

"Donner," I shouted. "Get a load of this. Ray frequency is up twelve points from normal here."

"Hey, Chief! Hey, Chief!" It was Bob Gelhaus' voice. "Rays up eleven at Redondo Beach. Time, ten to four. And temperature at 75. It'll shoot through ninety in the shade by noon."

"Donner!" I called. He didn't answer. Gelhaus did.

"It's my guess that the chief is buying himself a drink. This is the first time we've caught anything since we set up the system. Do you think Kiesel's supernova is behind it all?"

"Grow up, Gelhaus," I said. "That's comic-strip stuff."

"Is it? I hate to think of all the time and troubles Kapitz's wasting in Armenia checking it."

"Russians," I said, "will go for anything."

"And get there," Gelhaus said. "Remember Berlin?"

I remembered Berlin. But just then Berlin didn't interest me. I saw Jane coming from the kitchenette, the outline of her shimmering through the lead-glass wall. Hobey Ames came with her and he put his arm around her and pulled her close to him. He turned her loose when I came out. He just stood there, looking surprised, and grinning.

"This," I said to Jane, "is strictly for exercise."

I let Hobey have one on the chin. It knocked him flat, and maybe I looked surprised, too. But I felt fine.

"Tough guy," Jane said.

"Maybe," I said. "But I've had all I want of this. I told you that I didn't mind you having dates while I was gone—"

She laughed at me. "You don't mind now. But you want us to act as if you do, to make a pretence—"

That's when I finally blew up. A man can admit that, and be ashamed of it, and still it's just as bad. But this is straight—I blew. I slapped Jane's face.

"Tough guy," she said again.

Hobey got up. He meant to fight. It was all right with me, that part of it, the fighting. Except that I felt sick about the slap.

"Go on," I said to Jane. "Get out of here."

Hobey moved in between us then. His fists were doubled up.

"Let's don't," I said. "Just get out, both of you."

"Now, wait a minute, Einstein—" Hobey began.

I brushed him off. He wasn't half the man he looked. Just big, that's all. I went back in the lab and stood there looking at the 'phone: I couldn't think. All I could grasp was how Jane had looked when I slapped her face. How she had said to me, that second time, "Tough guy." If I'd had any sense, or even any decency, I could have got things straight. I was sure of that. Instead, I'd been a rat. I'd been an idiot. And Jane was gone. I'd thrown her out. Me, who had always tried to be so damned magnanimous. Me, who—

It was the buzzer that broke through to me. Mechanically, I took the 'phone.

"—bigger than that," the chief was drawling.

"Kiesel says he doesn't dare take time out for computing it, but maybe fifteen hundred kilometres a second."

"I guess you wouldn't link the cosmic rays with it?" Bob Gelhaus asked.

"Why not? There's got to be some reason for this jump in frequency. The rays will do until we find a way of disproving it."

"Hear that, Mize?" Gelhaus asked.

"No," I said. "What?"

He laughed. "The hell you didn't . . . Lord, it's getting hot. It'll hit a hundred degrees back there by noon. And I'll be swimming. Mmmmm! Sea breezes and sand nymphs. Want to swap places?"

Donner cut in abruptly. "Frequency's up," he said. "It's way up, boys. Twenty-five points. If it isn't Kiesel's supernova, what is it? I'm going to take a squint through the Big Eye. Keep close watch."

I knew that would take time. I didn't want to hear Bob Gelhaus chin himself to death. I left the lab and went back to the kitchenette. The place was cold. I saw the two half-finished drinks on the sink, Hobey's and Jane's. A cigarette had burned its length into the tablecloth. All pretty miserable. And all of this because I'd had to hit the guy. I couldn't play it smooth—couldn't wait and try to patch it up with Jane.

All right. All right. No crying at this hour. My watch showed half-past four and it was getting light. I found some tomato juice and corn flakes and some cream. While I was eating, something scratched my leg. Lorna was underneath the table, sitting up, begging.

"So you got left?" I said to her. She wagged her tail. I said, "Here, try some corn flakes, kid. Looks like we're both in it together."

She licked the bowl. And then she sat up suddenly again and yipped.

"What now?" I said.

Well, it was Jane. She came in from the bedroom. She had her nightgown on, and she looked good in it.

"Couldn't sleep," she said. "Too hot. Want me to fry some eggs for you?"

That really had me whipped. I must have looked it. Jane swept her light hair backward from her face. She didn't smile—that wasn't it, but there was something like a quirk around her lips.

"One thing you ought to learn," she said. "No woman ever lets herself be thrown out in the middle of the night. Sunnyside up?"

I got up then. "Jane, let's give it another try."

"You're all mixed up," she said, angry. "You don't know what you want."

I said, "And Hobey does?"

She stared at me. She bit her lip, then laughed. "That's right. He's coming back at eight o'clock. Then I'll get out for good."

"At eight," I said, "I'm going to knock him down again. I never had such fun."

"I'm glad it's fun for you," she said. "I like to leave my husbands laughing. Want these eggs?"

"Give 'em to Lorna. She's the one you love."

The buzzer started in the lab.

"There," Jane said. "There's your answer. Run along."

I KNEW I had to get that 'phone. And I was sore. I went into the lab and picked up the receiver. Gelhaus was talking.

"Ray frequency is up by forty points here," he said. "It's getting my goat. You'd almost think that you could see 'em when they get that thick. I'm even kind of glad about the lead roof on this lab."

"Kiesel's gone nuts," the chief said. "It's a supernova, all right. His helpers swear that they can see it without the Big Eye. It does look big."

"What's going on?" I interrupted them.

"So there you are," the chief barked. "What's your recording down there, Mize?"

I ran to the shaft, then back. "Fifty," I cried. "Up fifty, Chief! Good God——"

There was a pause. And then the chief's voice, in that drawl of his, flat almost to the point of tonelessness: "Something's blown up. Something's disintegrating out in space. I think——"

His voice shut off. There was a long silence with that empty ticking on the 'phone. It was 5 a.m. I heard the first streetcars go rumbling down the Broadway slope. I looked through my mirror window, east along First Street. Filipino 'bus boys were already straggling toward their work. A janitor, as usual, was leaning on his mop in front of the Times Building. A policeman went into the ABC Cafe. The routine thing. What always happened in the morning on this corner of Los Angeles. And yet I took a good look at it now. That last thing that the chief had said excited me. *Disintegrating out in space——*

Then I heard Gelhaus' sudden voice.

"Listen, Chief, I've seen your damned supernova. I kept thinking about that swim I meant to take. I looked out through my mirror window at the beach and then up at the sky. Well, there's a great bright blob up there. Could be the sun except that it's too high—almost straight up. It's your supernova or I'm going nuts like Kiesel."

Donner demanded. "What's your frequency?"

"Seventy above normal."

"Your's, Mize?"

I got it from the shaft. "Seventy-four, Chief."

"It's eighty here." An undertone of tenseness came into his drawl. "We're watching something monstrous. Something has gone wrong with the universal scheme of things. Don't leave your labs. No matter what you see or hear, *don't leave your labs*. You are recording a phenomenon for future generations, or——"

"Or what?" I insisted.

He shut me off by barking, "What's your frequency?"

"Now seventy-nine."

"Yours, Gelhaus?"

GELHAUS didn't answer. I waited a moment, hearing the hollowness that sung across the wire,

then I went from the lab to the bedroom. Jane had packed up. She stood there fully dressed, her hands jammed hard against her hips.

"I want you in the lab," I said.

"No, thanks, Sonny. None of those little curiosities for me."

"This is no curiosity," I said. "Something awful damn big is going on, and it may turn out to be dangerous. We have an idea that high ray frequencies may unbalance the human nervous system. These lead walls look silly, but they work."

"I still say no, thanks."

"I don't care what you say," I said.

I picked her up and carried her into the lab.

"You're going to stay in here," I said.

"Suits me, Tarzan," she said indifferently. "Amuse yourself by ordering me around. Until eight o'clock."

I said, "Until eight o'clock." And then I took her to the mirror window and adjusted it, so that we could see straight up.

It was there, all right. A great white ball of fire, larger than the sun, directly overhead at six in the morning. I let Jane look at it.

"What is it, Frank?"

"A supernova."

"But it's so close. What is it, Frank?"

"Stay in this lab with me," I said.

"You're trying to scare me with this stuff."

"I'm trying not to scare myself."

"Does it—mean anything?"

"Listen," I said. "Stick close and listen. I'll be busy."

"Frank!"

"Now cut it out," I said. I went to the recording shaft. By then, Jane was calling Lorna from the kitchenette into the lab. She closed the door. I noticed that as I went to the 'phone.

"It's ninety-one now, Chief," I said.

"It's ninety-six here," Donner said. "What's your temperature?"

"Eighty-seven degrees."

"Wish I could raise Gelhaus. He doesn't answer."

Then Gelhaus' voice, matter-of-fact: "Ray frequency at Redondo up to eighty-five. Temperature eighty-one. Sorry about the delay. I've seen something strange—a suicide. Made me sick or I'd have called you sooner, Chief. Old woman came across the Speedway, half a block from the beach, then walked on into the sand. I thought she'd stop. She didn't, Chief. Down to the water's edge, then walked right in. Hell of a thing to see. Waded out until nothing was showing but her head. A wave came in and when it passed, she'd gone. I never thought——"

"You'd better get a drink," I said.

"I couldn't hold it, Mize. My belly's dancing."

"Then I'll take it for you."

"What's he saying?" Jane demanded.

"Nothing," I lied.

"Suppose I get that drink for you. You're jittering."

"Suppose you do. A double."

She went out of the lab with Lorna trotting after her. I took another recording. Cosmic ray frequency was up to ninety-eight: I reported it to Donner. Gelhaus made a report—up to ninety-one there. His being at sea level made the difference, we figured—that plus the difference in temperatures. Jane came back with the drink. While I was downing it, Jane went to the mirror window.

"Come here, Frank," she called.

I looked at Kiesel's supernova. It had got bigger but seemed less intense. It wasn't sharply defined any more, rather like a circular cloud mass.

I took one look, then went back to the 'phone. "Chief, what's your sky up there at Wilson?"

"Yellow," said Donner. "Like sodium lights."

"Exactly like that here," I said.

"Here, too," said Gelhaus. "Earthquake weather——"

Jane called, "Frank—quick——"

The mirror window showed what shocked that out of her. A Mexican, extremely old, wrinkled the way they get, was walking stiffly through the tangle of the First Street traffic, not noticing the crowds or streetcars or the automobiles. Straight up the middle of the street he came, his eyes staring in front of him.

I said, "Dead drunk. Loco or drunk——"

The buzzer rasped. Gelhaus was talking rapidly.

"—he's going out into the water now. Not stopping—now he's, wading out, just like the woman did, exactly like the woman, Chief. I'm going after him!"

"Gelhaus! *Don't leave that lab.* Your duty is to stay inside your lab."

"The hell with that. I'm going—God!"

And then his tongue seemed thick.

"A wave went over him, like happened with the woman who went wading out. I've sat here like a log and watched two people drown, both of them walking into it like sleepwalkers. Chief, I—I'm sick again. You can't just sit and watch——"

"Frank!" Jane screamed. "Frank!"

I ran to her.

"That Mexican," she cried. "I saw it, Frank. I saw him walk straight into it——"

He lay there twisted in the street. A car had skidded past him to the curb.

"They jammed the brakes," Jane whispered, shivering. "He didn't try. He never seemed to see——"

"Will you shut up?" I snapped. She stared incredulously at me. Her eyes got wet. I took her to the couch and knelt beside her. "Sorry I spoke like that, but I had to do it, Jane. I had

to break your tension. This—well, just forget it. Can you take a drink ? ”

She shivered uncontrollably, shaking her head at me. I guess she thought I was pretty terrible. I went back to the 'phone and told the chief about the Mexican.

“ It can't be coincidence,” he said.

“ Meaning what, Chief ? ”

“ I know,” said Gelhaus. “ What's your recording, Mize ? ”

“ One hundred and nine. Eleven more points and the recorder's through.”

Then Donner's voice : “ Mine is through now. It's one-twenty above normal at Mount Wilson.”

“ Where's Kiesel ? ” I demanded. “ What's he say ? ”

“ I've shut my lab door. Haven't heard from him.”

I looked across at Jane. She was quiet now, lying there with her hands squeezed into fists. I tried to smile at her. It didn't work. I got a feeling then that nothing now was going to work. I didn't bother with the ray recorder any more. I sat watching Jane.

GELHAUS' voice snapped me out of it. “ Listen, Donner, and you, Mize. I want you to hear every word of this. I want you to check back with me. I've got to know that I'm not crazy now. Listen—a woman's coming past the Speedway now. Three kids with her. She's got that dead look on her face. One of the kids is bawling, hanging back. The others don't look at the bawling kid. They're walking down across the beach. Just straight ahead. They walk stiff-legged. The kid that's bawling stops, the other three go on. They're walking down into the surf, out to their knees. The other kid stops bawling. Now he's walking forward, too, not looking anywhere at all. They're going out—way out—the other kid, too—only their heads above the water now. A wave! They're—gone! All four are gone! All four—have drowned ! ”

“ Gelhaus ! ” It was the chief, his voice like clanging iron. “ Get away from that window and sit down and get control of yourself. When you're sure, go back and watch. You, too, Mize. Tell me everything. It's going in the wax. Take your 'phones with you and stay at the windows. Understand ? ”

“ Yes, Chief,” said Gelhaus.

“ Understand me, Mize ? ”

I said, “ Yes, Chief.”

All right—now everything. As if your eyes were cameras. It's for the wax. The whole of it ! Now, go ! ”

I took my chair and 'phong to the mirror window, then went across to Jane. I bent, quickly, and kissed her. Jane said, “ I'm sorry, Frank.”

“ Sorry for what ? ”

“ That we turned out the way we did. But you'll be happier.”

“ Will I ? ”

“ Yes, you'll—— ”

The buzzer jerked at me. This time it hurt. But I went back. Gelhaus was talking fast.

“ Yellow haze deepening at Redondo Beach. Sun's halfway to its zenith. Supernova like a vast luminous cloud. Sea a deep purple. Temperature, one-ten. I think—man coming from the Speedway walking stiffly. Heading for the surf. Behind him a woman—no, it's two women. There are four of them, Chief. All past middle age. There's another kid—another man, quite old. It seems that all of them are very old or very young—the weak, the sick. Susceptible. And they—they don't see anything. It's like they're stunned. Just walking—through the sand—some more of them. A steady stream of them. The Speedway's getting thick with them. Coming from every—Chief ! Good God Almighty, Chief ! ”

“ Gelhaus ! Gelhaus ! ”

“ The children, Chief ! Faces are dead. A woman's going in the water now. And more—more of them walking in. Stolid. A wave—— ”

“ Thick sodium haze at Broadway and First,” I started hastily. “ The intersection's jammed with cars, many of them empty now. A streetcar's running wild. It plows into a truck. The passengers are getting out. A girl, hysterical, starts running this way, screaming. Passengers mill stupidly on First Street. And this is west—they're walking west. The supernova's mass apparently is westward from me now. Sidewalks are jammed. A mob, it's like. Shoving this way, sluggishly, towards the west. Two young policemen trying to break it up. Those nearly half and half, those trudging west, those fighting to escape the tide of it. There's a policeman walking with that stiff tread now. The traffic tie-up is incredible. And rioting—at least a hundred of them fighting against being sucked into the mob.”

NOW Gelhaus resumed : “ Street leading inland from the speedway swarming. Side streets—they're coming out of the side streets, and they're all going west. It's like—like a migration of the lemmings—— ”

“ Column of smoke rising on East First in Little Tokyo,” I said. “ East First solid with people swarming up toward Bunker Hill. No police now—they've run away or joined the mob. Look out—too sudden for me—it's a plane, a crash. Crowd wiped out at the intersection. Flames all over the place. Gasoline, I guess. But they—keep—marching—straight into it—— ”

I felt Jane's fingers dig into my shoulder muscles. Frantically. I couldn't turn around. I felt it again, but I couldn't look at her. My voice, droning, kept on in spite of me.

“ Crowds milling around the fire—continuing west. Broadway in both directions choked with wrecked or abandoned cars. Marchers are pressing hard against these buildings' walls. They're being crushed, Chief—— ”

"Like lemmings," Gelhaus interrupted, "in migration. Haze is deepening. It's like a fog, a yellow fog. Redondo pier is rocking back and forth with people—it's black with them—crawling all over it. Crawling and spilling off the end until—Like Japs committing suicide at Okinawa. This is atomic fission, Chief—a vaster bomb, a star exploding and the world goes crazy. Chief, we're watching that! Chief, Chief, the pier! It's sagging—the pilings—There it goes!"

"Fire sweeping out of Little Tokyo up First Street," I droned on. "Billowing smoke all over the sky. Walls of the shops of First Street crack under the pressure of the mob. Bricks and plaster are falling from everywhere. Entire wall falling outward into the street burying them. And they're still coming. Flames running fast up East First now. Fires on Bunker Hill. A tinder box up there. It's almost an explosion. And they're rushing right into it. They're trapped—they don't realise it but they're trapped!"

Donner cried sharply, "My ray recorder! It's working again. Cosmic ray frequency is *down*! It's going *down*! It's down to one-nineteen. It's falling fast——"

"The supernova's vanished," Gelhaus cried. "Lost in the haze. It's burned out, or it blew up. What happened? How did it happen? Get hold of Kiesel——"

"Kiesel has gone. I'm alone up here. They wouldn't get into the lab. The lead would have saved them, but they wouldn't come in. I saw them go—Kiesel and his assistants, walking like those you saw, staring and stiff and straight ahead, due west. There was no way for them. They went over the mountain's side. It drops a thousand feet. Kiesel's gone. They're all gone."

"The beach here. It's awful, Chief. You don't know——. The rays are falling. Down to one-seventeen——"

"A wall's collapsing here at First——"

SUDDENLY my voice went dead. I saw the two of them outside. I hadn't heard her leaving me. I hadn't heard the closing of the lab door while I talked. But it was Jane. Moving with Hobey close against the wall outside. Jane, terrified by what she saw for the first time. Jane, turning suddenly backward to the door. Then Hobey stumbled. Jane tried to catch his hand. But as she did it, I saw the stiffening of her arm.

I ran. The lab door, opening, let in a wall of heat. I plunged ahead. I tripped and fell. My head struck on the sidewalk and I felt the blood. And then, in front of me, I saw them—Jane and Hobey, dazed, unhurried, wide-eyed, stiff. My legs wouldn't do what I wanted them to do. And now my mind itself was getting fuzzy. Heat and that haze, the yellow haze. Time died. My hand reached Jane's. I knew somehow that I was

lifting her. I started back. It was the way that walking in a dream is, slow and retarded by a force you cannot understand. And then at last indifference.

"I've got," the thought came, "to go back—that other way."

I'd reached our door. Something was tugging at my leg. That moment, while I was numb with indecision, with Jane rigid in my arms, that tug, that small and ineffectual pulling guided me. I reached the living room, the lab. I stumbled through into it, under the lead roof. Again I fell. And it was Lorna that I saw, licking my face. And then the lights went out.

WHEN I came to, Jane was sitting up. She sobbed, shaking her head at me. "And I thought that you meant to let me go!"

I said, "I never meant to let you go."

"I never meant to go. That's why I stayed at first. Until, there at the end, you wouldn't even speak to me——"

"Jane," I said, "I had to keep on talking in that—Jane! The 'phone!"

When I got there I heard Bob Gelhaus' voice, strident with jubilation.

"They're waking up! They're getting up and walking, all the ones that are still alive. They're crazy now, sick with a panic they don't understand. But they're coming out of it. It's over! It's over, Chief!"

"Recording down to fifty-four," came Donner's voice. "And dropping fast."

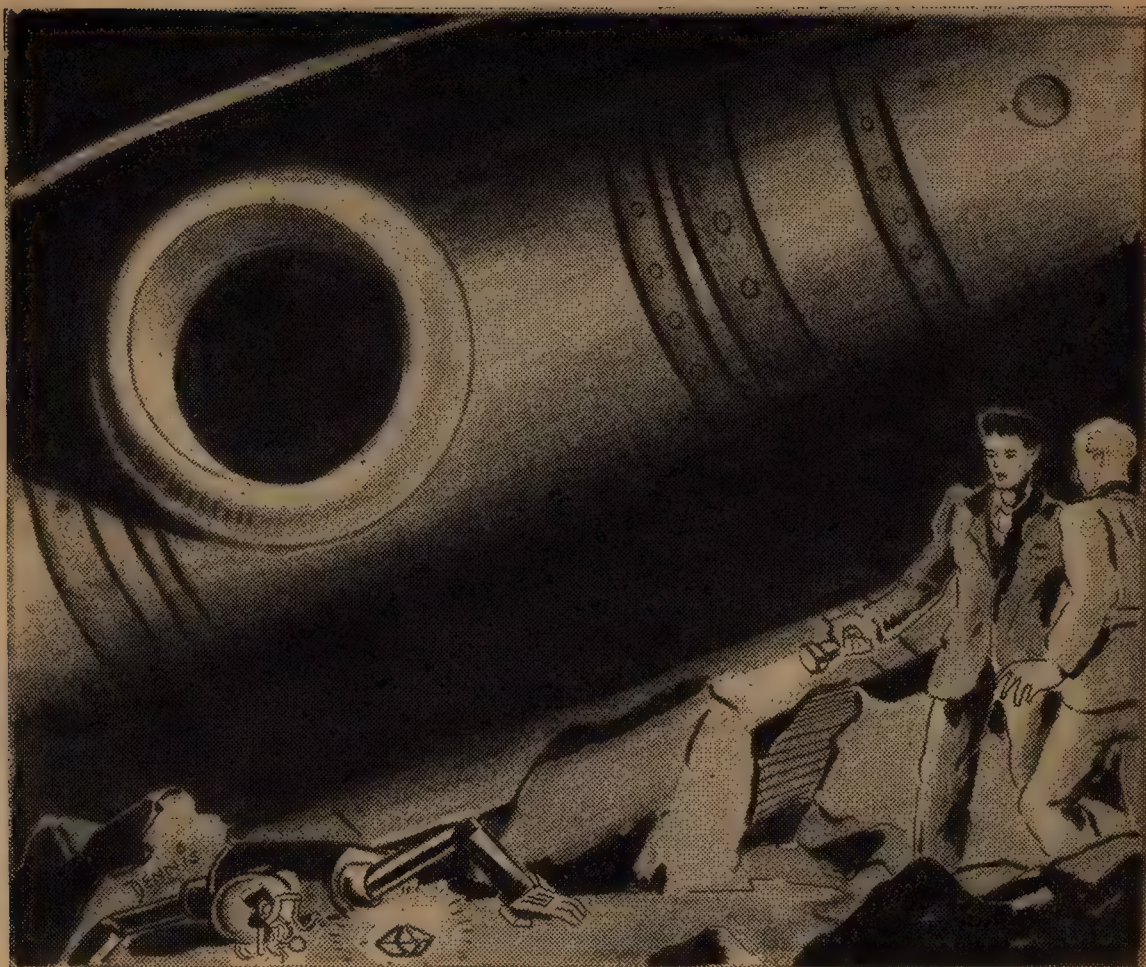
"Donner! Gelhaus!" I shouted.

"Mize!" Gelhaus yelled. "We thought we'd lost you——"

"It's over, Mize," the chief was droning on the wire. "The earth has got by with it. A tragedy, the worst of time—but still the earth has got by with it. It's luck—luck, and time. Sometimes they burn out quickly like this. We may never know why. Go to your window now. And tell me everything. Get it on the wax. We're the only people who can do it. Mize——"

So I went to the mirror window. I watched the stunned city awakening. I saw the two fires burn themselves out when they reached the Civic Centre. I saw the last, most poignant hour of it. The heaps of dead, the terrible hysteria. Jane watched with me and I held her arm tightly to keep her close. And Lorna, who had pulled us back—Lorna stood faithfully at our feet.

I was limp and shaky—I couldn't hold a match and I didn't trust my knees—and I still couldn't think straight; but a lot of things began to make sense all of a sudden. I knew Jane and I were all right together and always would be. And I knew I'd never have the urge to kick Lorna in the teeth again. I reached down to pat her, and before I knew what was going on, I was kneeling down and hugging her as hard as I could.



FROM BEYOND THE DAWN

BY F. G. RAYER

Radio contact with Beings of another world came at a time when Earth was invaded by robots. There was a link—somewhere—for the Others had the answer to the robots destruction.

THE sun was sinking between the crests of the two distant hills and Derek Faux shivered at its redness and the chill wind which was coming up the slopes. The sky was ominous with heavy tints in wide blots of colour; towards the zenith and East the colour faded into a thick blackness which seemed to press down upon the hills, unrelieved by either stars or patches of light-reflecting cloud. It gave promise of a wild night with rain lashing down from the overcast sky as the blanket of cloud piled thicker and a cutting wind whining across the hills to sigh a moan about his laboratory where it stood on the lone peak.

Faux drew his collar up about his ears and his footsteps hastened along the stony path. He half wished he had not come out—but he had wanted

to clear his thoughts and a walk over the hills in the evening air was the best way. He must think—try to get clear in his mind the full significance of that which had happened in his laboratory. Even now he could not fully realise that he had contacted something—he could put no other word to it—and that, whatever kind of being it might be, had replied. With his back now to the wind and occasional rain-drops, he skirted a granite quarry which would stand against the elements until the earth was old. Radio waves would take minutes to reach any of the planets and return; years to plumb even the shallowest depths of the distant stars. It was because of that that he had radiated every evening for over twelve months now, and scarcely expected an answer even if there was any intelligent life in the vastness of space and it could hear and reply.

Then that evening he had received an answer—it had been distorted almost to the point of illegibility and weak as if it had come a vast distance. But it had come instantaneously and his directive apparatus would give nothing but a null reading on it.

Faux bit his lips as he passed the quarry and turned up the slanting path which led to the laboratory. The rapidity with which the answer had come cut out the possibility of it originating on even the nearest planet. It had presented a dealock between logic and the actual fact he had experienced in the radio room which had made his mind reel and sent him out on this walk through the growing darkness.

GAINING the laboratory he let himself in and returned to the radio room. The daylight tubes in the ceiling still flooded the chamber with brilliant illumination and a man with a bony face, almost bloodless in the glare, was swinging one leg rhythmically from his seat on a tall stool. His eyes glinted as Faux shut the door and he raised a hand in greeting.

"So you have given up your attempt to contact other worlds! I thought this was the time for your listening session."

Faux crossed the room, ignoring the faint irony in the other's voice. He nodded. "I have not given up. I have succeeded."

Daker's face showed surprise. His stiff attitude vanished.

"What've you contacted?"

There was tense excitement in his voice. Without looking at him Faux crossed before the mass of apparatus which stretched along one wall of the room and stared out through the curved window, trying to make his thoughts coherent. Beyond the laboratory the hills stretched in undulation upon undulation and in the far distance the evening brightness was fading from the sky. At last he turned to face Daker, who was now tapping impatiently with his fingers upon the stool.

"I do not know. I cannot tell from where the reply comes—it's a full hour since I heard it and still I can't decide."

Daker made an impatient gesture, interrupting.

"Let me hear for myself."

Without a word Faux returned to the bench before the apparatus and depressed a switch. Tubes glowed blue and a gentle humming filled the chamber. With fingers which trembled slightly he took up the taper key he had used because an alien would find speech incomprehensible. Conscious that Daker was sitting, hands on knees, and every nerve tense, he keyed three dots.

There was a bare moment's silence, save for the gentle humming, then three dots, wavering and distorted, came through the reproducer like a whisper from some world beyond.

The breath hissed from between Daker's lips. "Perhaps it is a reflective echo from some planet."

Faux shook his head. "Too rapid, and listen . . ."

He keyed three dots, then two, then three more.

There was a pause, then eight evenly-spaced dots came back to his anxious ears.

Daker licked his dry lips, stirring uneasily. "So you have actually contacted some intelligence and it can add. Where does that get you?"

"Everywhere—yet nowhere. It is no fool playing a trick because directive apparatus would show the location of the station replying."

"But an alien world could not reply so quickly," objected Daker after a moment's silence. "Radio waves at the speed of light are slow travellers in the vastness of space."

Faux frowned without replying. The other had put his finger immediately on the strangest and most significant point. The explanation of what was happening baffled his imagination.

"What does the directive apparatus show?" continued Daker as he slipped from his stool.

"It shows nothing," replied Faux, watching for the amazement he knew must come to the other's face. "Or, if you prefer, it shows that the transmitter answering is in this very laboratory."

Daker swore. "You're joking!"

"You may try the readings for yourself. I've checked and re-checked and it's as I say. How this comes about beats me—but it accounts for the promptness of the reply."

With a growl Daker shook his head as if his reason could not grasp the significance, if significance there was. For a moment he prowled round the room, then he took up a position by the window.

"So you needn't wonder I needed a walk," said Faux, switching off the apparatus with a flick of his finger. "It'll take some time to grow accustomed to the idea that the person replying is *here*. When I have I'll start the routine tests I planned based on numbers. All reasoning beings must understand numerical items—two and two must make four everywhere in space or eternity."

Daker seemed not to be listening. He was staring fixedly out of the window and his mouth had dropped open. He uttered an exclamation.

"What in the deuce is this!"

Leaving the bench Faux crossed to the window beside him and followed the pointing finger with his eyes. Although it was dusk there was still enough light to see and he started in surprise.

UPON the edge of the quarry below them there rested something which looked like a giant metal cigar. For the moment the idea of a spaceship flashed into his mind, but both ends of the object were pointed and there was no sign of anything which could possibly be propelling tubes. The whole thing was, in fact, as featureless as an elongated ball-bearing without any suggestion of port, door or rocket tube.

Daker rubbed his eyes. "Am I crazy! One second it wasn't there—the next it was!"

Mastering his astonishment Faux looked sideways at him. "It must come from somewhere! Out of the sky—or the earth."

"It did not!" retorted Daker with something which sounded like an oath. "I was staring at the quarry and it just appeared like light when a switch is pressed!"

"Then we'll go and see what it is!"

"Wait!" Daker caught his arm as he turned. "Something is happening!"

Faux stared again at the featureless object and became aware that a slim dark circle was visible on its side. As they watched the circle grew thicker and

thicker, the centre portion seeming to bulge from the vessel. It looked as if something was unscrewing a circular door from the inside, he realised with a shock.

All at once the bulging metal fell to the ground; a purple radiance streamed out through the doorway it had filled, spreading over the depths of the quarry like a searchlight beam. In the beam, partly obscuring it, something moved ponderously, grotesquely reminiscent of a man. It was large and shone metallically in the purple light from behind it. Upon the very edge of the door it stopped as if seeming to look down into the quarry which came to its feet.

Daker gave a whistle of increasing surprise. "The whole thing's slipping!"

It was so. With eyes still staring from the shock of the unexpected Faux scanned the long, gleaming cigar. It was poised upon the sloping granite lip of the quarry and one end was slewing. They were too distant to hear the crunch of stone on metal or the grating shock of its movement, but it was steadily slipping down and down. Suddenly the poised end dropped, overbalancing. There was a fleeting glimpse of flailing metal limbs as the being from inside struggled to save itself, then together the two toppled over the edge. Across the quarter of a mile of sloping hillside came a rumble and the floor quivered beneath their feet as dislodged rocks and stones followed the vessel and its inhabitant into the depths of the quarry.

Faux jumped into activity. "We must see what it is!"

They raced down the slope in the face of the wind and pattering rain. From the lip of the quarry they could see nothing; inky blackness filled the depths and no purple radiance relieved it. With the lamp he had snatched up in his hand Faux picked his way down the steep incline leading round the quarry to its shallowest end. There they slithered down a stony declivity and his searching beam picked out the metal cigar.

They approached carefully. It was full twelve feet in diameter and twice as long and was sloping across a bed of weeds and rocks where it had fallen. They picked their way amongst the rubble, scarcely knowing what to expect. Daker whistled.

"The thing is crushed under the ship!"

It was. Faux advanced cautiously. Was it living? he wondered. Were there more creatures of the same kind inside? But nothing stirred and at last they were standing over the prone body. As he played the light upon it Faux realised here was something which had never lived in the true sense—it was a robot. The crushing weight of the vessel had pulped its body, revealing an intricate mechanism, the head—as he mentally named the topmost section—was split open, showing more mechanisms. As he stooped to look his toe touched something which glinted pinkly in the torchlight and he picked it up. It was a queerly-shape crystal. Raising the torch beam he looked for the door. Dare they look inside?

AT that moment Daker gave a cry, grabbing his arm fiercely so that the fingers bit into his flesh.

"Look, Faux! There's more!"

Upon the lip of the quarry there was a twinkle of purple lights as if from a score of opening doors. With a start Faux realised the vessels must have

appeared there just as mysteriously as had the first while they had been scrambling down into the quarry. As he gaped upwards each twinkle of purple was shadowed over by a moving form—the robots were emerging.

"Let's get out of here!" yelled Daker as he still stared and they turned, racing back the way they had come. It was a scramble to get back on to the lip of the quarry, even at the shallowest place. Faux paused, panting, and looking above. Now many more purple lights were visible. Every step up the hillside brought more into view until when they had gained the slopes by the laboratory the whole of the hillside below them was dotted with purple circles which merged into one hazy pattern. Daker was coming behind him and they paused, both gasping from the race uphill.

"Look!" he muttered. "What now?"

The purple radiance was still there, but above it, like a blanket covering all the vessels and all the creatures which had lumbered from them, was a deep yellow glow. It seemed to shimmer and Faux had the impression that it was only a shell—a hollow dome of light beneath which the robots and mysterious ships could rest as if below a protective shield.

AFTER two days the robots had made no move except on the morning following their appearance when two had left the yellow dome under the protection of a similar shimmering defensive radiance. The alarm had spread by then and fearing an attack upon one of the neighbouring cities the government had sent a small squadron of planes over. As the robots strode down the hillside towards the valley the planes had released their bombs. From high up in the laboratory Faux had watched the flashes and the swirling clouds of dust. At last the smoke cleared away—to reveal the robots slowly making their way back under the yellow shimmering radiance. They were unharmed.

As he pondered upon what had happened and was likely to happen Daker entered. His eyes were tired and he took a place on one of the stools.

"What do you make of these robots?" he asked as he produced a cigarette.

Faux considered a moment. "I don't know. They seem alien in their construction, yet there are no metals used in them which are not found on this earth. It is lucky one was damaged in the quarry—otherwise we should have known nothing of them."

"And over a thousand have appeared," added Daker in a thin voice. "We have not destroyed one. That yellow light must be a force screen and that one fell into the quarry before his was active. The strongest bombs the military dared use were like rain drops on a battleship. They seem indestructible."

Faux nodded. "They are. I wonder if they herald an attack by living creatures? They have not harmed us yet but seem to be awaiting a signal. And we cannot destroy them. I feel that although an atomic bomb would remove the hill it would not touch the yellow dome."

"You are right," said Daker in a heavy tone. He breathed a whisp of smoke from his nostrils pensively. "What do you make of the crystal from that robot? It seemed to be its vital centre."

"Nothing, it is beyond my understanding." Faux frowned, glancing at the crystal he had picked up by the robot. It was as big as a man's fist and cut with a thousand dissimilar facets. Inside adjoining facets glowed through the pinkly transparent material. But what it was, or what its purpose, he did not know.

"It is similar to a piezo-electric crystal," he added after a moment. "Electrical impulses make it vibrate mechanically and mechanical stresses produce an electrical output."

"I see." Daker nodded his head.

At that moment the laboratory shuddered. Rising Faux stared down through the window, conscious that there was a dull thrumming of planes overhead. In the distance the yellow dome of light was visible and as he watched a string of flashes straddled it as a stick of bombs fell. The laboratory shuddered again and the dull rumble of the explosions echoed loudly even in the almost soundproof chamber. The dome remained intact and the robots did not move.

"Do you connect them with your radio signals?" asked Daker, coming beside him. "You had your first reply just before they appeared."

"No, they don't seem to be connected. I have found they know all kinds of calculations, and what colours are. I transmitted numbers representing the wavelengths of the colours of our spectrum, purposely missing out some, and they filled the gaps."

He dropped silent. It was strange that although he had contacted this other intelligence he had no method of learning much about it. They had established a common knowledge of mathematics by their code and there they had reached a dead end. Something which might have been speech had come over once, but it had been absolutely unintelligible and they had reverted to tapping our numbers.

The laboratory quivered again and a dull rumble interrupted his thoughts.

"The fools are still dropping the largest bombs they dare use," grated Daker. "It's obviously useless."

Faux nodded. "What will happen if they attack?"

"Heaven help us!" Daker shrugged and waved his hand towards the apparatus. "Is there any chance of using television to find out what your contact is like?"

"No."

They dropped silent. It was damnable nothing could be done to touch the robots outside, thought Faux. They were waiting now, as if for a storm which must break sometime, and which would be the fiercer for its delay. At the back of his mind was the feeling that perhaps the radio signals did have some relation to them, and that the key which would save them from the threat was there if only he could find it. As he pondered three staccato dots came through the reproducer above the apparatus and he picked up his notebook, already half-filled with figures.

"THAT is the signal they always commence with. We can't touch the robots so we may as well listen."

More dots followed and he counted, scribbling down the numbers. Daker was silent and there was no other sound except for the occasional rumble of explosions. At last the numbers were finished; there was a pause after which they began to come again.

Faux examined his notebook with a frown. There were the figures 35, 66, 91, 91, 91, 139. He showed them to Daker. "What d'you make of this?"

"It's a series. But why three 91s?"

Faux pondered before replying. "I imagine they want to throw that number into relief—underline it, let us say."

"And where does that get us?" demanded Daker, frowning.

For reply Faux paced up and down the chamber a few times, his forehead held in his hands. It got them nowhere—and yet meant everything.

"Those figures are the distances of the major planets from the sun, not including the farther ones," he said, turning to face Daker. "If we translate the numbers we get Mercury, Venus, Earth, Earth, Earth, Mars. The meaning is clear."

The other man's face paled. "You mean they are telling us they are on the third planet—Earth!"

"Yes. That, with the null directive readings, proves they are on this hilltop."

"Lord!" Daker screwed up his face grotesquely. "I can't believe it!"

"That's how I felt at first, but it's proved now. I even hope they may help us, even if we never know just who, or what, they are."

Daker stared. "How?"

"I somehow feel they are more intelligent than we. I've sent them all the data, in numerical form, of the robot's pink crystal. They may be able to add to it—to give us some factor we haven't thought of. A pink crystal seems to be the centre of being of these robots and soon they will attack."

He took down the crystal, each facet of which had been measured. Already he had transmitted every factor he could think of in addition—its weight, volume and transparency. He began again, hardly conscious that the bombing had stopped, using figures which the others must understand.

Only once did he stop as Daker stirred uneasily. "The robots are beginning to come up the hill," he murmured.

ANTIGVO stared out of the plastic dome, a thousand questions in his brain. The sun, red as fire, was just sinking between the crests of two distant hills, sending sloping rays across the mouldering cliffs where once a quarry had been. Now it was but a tiny indentation covered with grass and rubble.

Behind him there was a quiet exclamation and Antigvo turned to meet the penetrating eyes of a slender man with a head almost as wide as his shoulders. Passim smiled so that the skin wrinkled everywhere on his hairless face and motioned towards and airsprung seat.

"Come and listen, Antigvo. I do not know what they are trying to tell us."

Antigvo turned to the seat, arranging his head upon the rests which all earthmen used to relieve their necks of a brain evolved into the largest part of their bodies by a half-million years of civilisation.

Before him the receiver whirled, a mass of intricate apparatus which lulled his eye. For a moment, as he often found himself doing, his gaze lifted to a pressed plastic case above the apparatus, which had stood there ever since he had become a student in the gleaming experimental laboratory many years before.

In it was a crystal, a trifle larger than one of his own slender hands. It had a thousand dissimilar facets and glowed pinkly in the radiance of the tubes in the ceiling. It, with a thousand others, had been found five hundred feet below the crumbling rock of the hillside where an indentation showed a quarry had once been.

They had kept that crystal, and the others, wondering whose hand had designed them and how they had lain there untouched, protected by the soil and the rock, for a period which would rust to nothing even the toughest steel. Geology had dated them nearly half a million years old, judging by the strata where they rested and to Antigvo they did not seem to fit the age from whence they had come—an age when civilisation was new with none of the things necessary to modern life as he knew it.

From the crystal he looked down at the mass of figures the machine had recorded. In a flash his mind calculated their possibilities, trying to find the reason for them. Surely, he thought, this intelligence they had contacted would not send them unless they had some significance?

But they were not cubes or squares; not in arithmetical progression, or logs or antilogs. In short they were figures which seemed to bear no definite relationship one to another, and they presented no mathematical picture to his mind. They seemed as incomprehensible as had been his young child's scribbings when it had first held the psychoscribe to its little bald pate.

Passim had returned to the mobile chair he used to rest his weakly legs and sank his domed head back into the rest with a sigh of relief.

"Why do they transmit this incomprehensible information?"

Antigvo slewed in his seat. "The inference is that it is not incomprehensible and that they attach great importance to it."

Passim smiled. "Yet not for five thousand years has there been a problem our human minds could not solve."

"So perhaps it is data of some material thing they think of importance."

"Possibly." Passim pressed a button which sent his chair skimming round and towards the receiver. "Do you think they realise the importance of null directive readings. They must have noted that."

"I imagine so," returned Antigvo with sedate consideration. He looked at the machine again; the long series of figures had been repeated, but they were still without apparent sense. "I suggest we have Kabek up."

"Yes." Passim touched a button in his chair. "Kabek?"

"Yes?" A three-dimensional image of an old man, seated in a body chair with his head hanging heavily on the rest, appeared before them.

"Will you come here?"

The image made a tiny gesture with one hand. "Yes." It faded from view. A few moments later the door of the chamber snapped open and Kabek appeared inside. He manouvered his chair smoothly across the floor until he was by their side.

ANTIGVO studied the mathematician for a second covertly. Kabek had proved himself a genius fifty

years previously, but now his health was failing. But the brilliant brain in the bald domed head was not losing its ability and arrangements were already being made to transfer it to a receptacle in the great bank of specialised brains which were kept alive and still worked through psychoscribes.

"We do not know what these figures mean," murmured Passim respectfully.

Kabek examined the record, his head still hanging in its rest as if he no longer had the strength to raise it; at last a tiny smile crinkled the parchment of his face.

"I have seen this data sheet before, excepting in that it is less complete," he murmured. "It is the data of any one of the crystals such as were found in the excavations made by my grandfather when he was building the foundations of this laboratory. It is remarkable."

Antigvo's eyes flickered up to the crystal in the case. It had stood there since the laboratory had been made, a kind of sign to show that there had been wonders in the past, as well as the present. They had long since tabulated every characteristic of it, even down to the way a radio wave of a certain frequency would turn it deep green and make it vibrate as if it would shatter to atoms.

"What data is missing?" asked Passim from his chair.

Kabek's brows drooped and Antigvo seemed to feel the power of the intelligence behind them so that his own thoughts were but like a breath of air in a cyclone.

"The missing data is the frequency which makes it vibrate," stated Kabek.

Passim laughed. "They are trying to test our intelligence! Let us repeat the factors with our extra one added."

"Excellent!" agreed Kabek with rare vivacity. "We will repeat our new figure several times so that they will not miss it."

He whirled his chair round so that Passim could take his position at the apparatus. Slowly leaving his chair Passim placed himself on the airsprung seat, his head in the rests but his slender tapering hands upon the controls.

"I can remember the figures," said Kabek, and as he numbered them Passim's fingers sped in a complicated pattern over the keyboard of the transmitter.

"THE robots will soon be at the top of the hill," stated Daker with an underlying fear. "Nothing can stop them."

Faux turned from the last repetition of the figures of the pink crystal and looked out through the window. Advancing towards the laboratory, beneath a protective yellow blanket which shimmered more brightly than the sun, came a row of machines; none hurried and none faltered although above them jet-craft circled. No bombs fell—it was as if the authorities had at last realised that they were as helpless against the robots as a flutter of sparrows.

Misery was in his heart. It seemed impossible that anything could sweep humanity from the earth. The reproducer cracked and he returned his attention to the receiver, listening.

"They have stopped in a body just above the quarry," said Daker from his position of vantage.

"It looks as if they are waiting and will then all advance together."

With sinking spirits Faux nodded. No one on earth could do anything against their enemies. The people in the towns would panic; the machines could kill and kill—if they wished—without suffering themselves.

His attention flashed back to the apparatus. A new factor was coming with the data which he had repeated but a few minutes before. It was repeated once, then again, as if to make it stand out.

"What is that?" asked Daker without turning.

Faux pondered as he stared at the new number. "It can't be any other measurement because we have tabulated them all. We've also found its density and weight, and everything else we could think of."

"Couldn't a crystal like that have any other characteristics?"

"It might have a resonant frequency," admitted Faux dispiritedly, "but it is so complicated that does not seem possible."

Daker turned from the window. His face was pale and tinged with a golden hue which was reflected up from the yellow dome of light below. "What are the figures they send?"

"They are two large figures repeated several times," said Faux, consulting his notebook. "If it were one figure it could be a frequency which would affect the crystal, but two figures are impossible."

Daker slapped his knee. "No! Perhaps the vibrating frequency is *both* together."

Faux put his head upon his hands to think. He groaned. The complications which were amassing seemed too much! They made his head swim. But he must force himself to think. The crystal might have a complicated resonant frequency and the intelligence they had contacted might be aware of it. If not, why did they repeat the figures?

"We may as well try," he said at last. "It will mean breaking communication with them, but that does not matter now. Soon the robots will overrun us anyway."

He adjusted his apparatus, taking the figures from his notebook. Almost at once Daker gave a great cry.

"Look!"

Following his pointing finger Faux saw that the crystal on the shelf had turned green and was vibrating with a fierce hum as if it would tear itself to shreds. The facets quivered and trembled, but

suddenly there was such a reverberating rumble from outside that he jumped up and looked instead out of the window.

The yellow radiance which had enshrouded the robots since their landing was gone. The ranks of the robots themselves were splitting; machine after machine stumbled and jerked spasmodically, as if out of control. Their arms waved wildly and they lumbered one into another, flinging themselves down upon the ground and sometimes seizing up their companions.

"They're running amok!" cried Daker.

It was true. They were stumbling and falling down the slope towards the quarry, some to fall over with flailing arms and some to be pushed or thrown over by their comrades in the wild bedlam of battling machines which blundered ever farther and farther down the slope.

Upon the shelf the pink crystal still rang as if it would jump from the ledge and shatter itself upon the floor.

Outside dropped complete silence. Not a single robot was left upon the sloping hillside above the quarry and in the depths to which they had slithered, machines gone mad, nothing stirred.

"So that was their one weak spot," murmured Daker.

PASSIM swung himself round in the chair, the rest moving with his head upon its swivel.

"Curious," he murmured. "They have not replied to our numbers. But it does not matter, we will begin again tomorrow."

Antigvo sighed. It had been rather exciting and he was tired. And tomorrow his nephew Nigro would be coming to discuss the new theory with Kabek so as to prove to them that time was like a loop which might turn back on itself—that would be the greatest discovery of man, if it were true. Then they would begin to design the robots which Nigro claimed could be controlled by the queer crystals from the old quarry. He smiled as he swung his chair round. It man was mortal his envoys need not be—they could be robots who could travel through the farthest depths of space, and in fact to any time in all eternity as well, if Nigro was right. Antigvo chuckled. If time was a loop where was its beginning? He must remember to ask Nigro that.

THE END.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

"BIGHEAD"

BY WILLIAM DE KOVEN

"EDGE OF NIGHT"

BY JOHN K. AIKEN

DON'T MISS OUR FOURTH ISSUE

FANTASIA DEMENTIA

BY MAURICE G. HUGI

Perhaps a machine isn't necessary for Time travel. Arty Cameron's body was certainly in To-day, but his mind visited other places

PROLOGUE

Arty Cameron was a car thief.

It is one way of getting a living with the minimum of exertion. See a decent car, unoccupied, drive off with it, dump it with the car spivs in the East End and collect an easy £100!

Of course, this method of getting a crust had its drawbacks. What form of living hasn't? For instance, there were police patrol cars equipped with radio; there were policemen who seemed to have nothing better to do than loaf by unattended cars; busy business people who were not too busy to notice that the man who was getting into the car was not the same man who had parked the machine! Not to mention inconsiderate owners who appeared just as Arty Cameron was about to insert his master key in the ignition switch.

Arty had spent twelve of his thirty-two years of life in prison all through the machinations of the above factors, which was most discouraging. They say crime does not pay, but, alas, Arty had yet to learn his lesson!

So he wandered the streets of Bayswater in search of a likely vehicle that would provide his needs for the next month or two. He saw a handsome Lagonda tourer carelessly parked outside a house, the ignition key conveniently left in the switch. There were some interesting looking suitcases in the back, also a good fur rug and a brief case. A nice nick if he could get away with it.

Arty surveyed the house and the street. No one at the front door or the windows, the street was happily empty of traffic or pedestrians. Now or never!

He didn't pause in his stride. As he drew abreast of the car, Arty slipped the door handle and was behind the wheel in one smooth, practised movement. He engaged second speed, held his clutch out and switched on. As the engine roared to life he eased the clutch in and pulled away from the kerb. The deep bellow of the exhaust was rather alarming, but Arty kept his foot on the gas.

He did not hear the front door open, nor did he see the excited owner dance with impotent fury on the pavement. He took the first turning and headed for Marble Arch, he knew safety lay in numbers and Arty meant to get this car to his pals or burst!

AS he slid into top gear, his exhaust quietening down to a gentle burble, he caught sight of the owner perched on the running board of a pursuing laundry van. With a muttered curse, Arty slammed his foot down on the accelerator pedal; the Lagonda leaped forward under the impulse of the mighty engine. With the greatest of ease he left the lumbering laundry van in the rear and shot into the busy traffic along the Bayswater Road.

Unfortunately, Arty did not see the police car as he sped in and out of the traffic. But the police driver could not fail to see the apparently dangerous piece of driving that Arty was forced to indulge in to make his getaway.

The next thing Arty Cameron knew was the fact that a police car was running neck and neck with him and that the uniformed constable next the driver was waving him to draw in at the kerb. Arty was in no mood to argue with the cops, and to pull up at the kerb and take to his heels was out of the question; there were far too many people about for him to escape; so Arty roared along at a good eighty miles an hour with the police car in hot pursuit.

The Lagonda jumped the traffic lights at Marble Arch and so did the police car. More by good luck than judgment, they both avoided crashes in the tangled press of traffic. But the luck could not hold for ever, and it was the big black and gold Lagonda that crashed in trying to evade a huge lorry laden with bricks.

Arty never knew how he had skidded round the heavily laden vehicle. He mounted the pavement and smashed into the massive stone pier of a huge departmental store. He had a brief moment of terrific jolting as the Lagonda jumped the kerb, and equally brief vision of people scattering before his onslaught, and then . . .

His body flew over the windscreen, for he had slid away instinctively from the menace of being pinned by the steering column. An instant glimpse of concrete masonry, and then darkness and silence. No pain, no shock of contact; just a moment of sheer terror as he flew through the air, and then the all enveloping blackness and quiet.

Fifteen minutes later, ambulance men picked up his shattered body and bore it off to hospital. He was rushed to the casualty ward, stripped, washed and put to bed. Two surgeons surveyed his



mashed forehead. With cold-blooded precision one of them gently probed the pulverised bone with his finger tips and turned to his companion.

"Hopeless," he muttered. "Frontal, temporal and both orbital bones smashed to smithereens. It's a wonder his neck isn't broken!"

They gave him forty-eight hours, but Arty Cameron refused to die. He lay in his cot, neither dead nor alive. He breathed gently, slowly, and a trickle of saliva moistened the corners of his mouth. Apart from his soft, sighing breath, he made no other movements.

Dr. Schrodinger decided to operate.

"It will probably kill him, but he'll die anyway, if we don't do something," he said, after a short chat with the House Surgeon. "If I can piece those bones together, and remove the torn portions of the frontal lobe of the brain without finishing him off, it'll be a most interesting operation."

"Interesting? Unique, I'd say," the House Surgeon observed. "Can you hazard what the effects of the partial removal of the front allobe may have on the patient?"

Dr. Schrodinger pursed his lips. "That is doubtful. It may affect his speech slightly if I have to cut too deeply into the Fissure of Sylvius. Hearing may also become damaged or distorted. I can't say more, except that I remember a case where the time-sense was temporarily upset, but that patient fully recovered."

Still Arty Cameron refused to die. The operation was carried out, Dr. Schrodinger performing extensive trephining to the frontal bone. He replaced the fragments with a plate of silver. Damaged portions of the brain were removed and the entire operation went off without a hitch. Arty Cameron was returned to his bed and watched day and night. At last the time came when the doctors decided that he could come off the danger list.

Now, instead of a nurse, a policeman sat at his bedside. From time to time he was relieved by other policemen, but the car thief was kept under constant surveillance.

Arty lay there. The doctors were puzzled. He neither spoke nor moved. His reflexes were negative, he was apparently stone-deaf. Though his eyes were wide open, his gaze was fixed. He had to be fed and washed by the nurses. Twice in three weeks he stirred and groaned, and a clammy sweat beaded his scarred brow. He spoke once, just before he died; it was a coherent tale he told.

And so, Arty Cameron died. And this is the story he told before he passed away.

I

ARTY CAMERON had a moment of terror as he hurtled through the air, his eyes glued in fascination to the concrete buttress of the great store. He instinctively raised his arms to ward off the blow.

It came like a thunderclap. No shock, no pain. Just an instant of tremendous compression, then a sensation of sinking into a soft, velvety blackness. No vivid lights, no receding stars; just blackness, silence, a feeling of sleepy restfulness.

How long he had been submerged in that ocean of bouyant blackness, Arty did not know. Time had no meaning for him. It might have been ten minutes; it might have been ten days; or even ten centuries! He was conscious of floating to the surface of the Seas of Sleep; of resting, softly cradled in a trough of ease.

Still no pain. He sighed luxuriously as he laid there. No pain, nothing to worry about. He was dead, he knew that. If he was alive, he would be in a torment of agony. No man could crash into that massive pillar and live, anyway!

As he lay there, swaying in a gentle see-saw motion on that placid lake of semi-consciousness, he perceived a dim, distant star. It was faint, but burning steadily. Without thought, he fastened his eyes to that friendly luminescence. He felt it was his spirit, his ego, floating there above him.

After a time it seemed closer. He reached for it. It came as a shock to him to realise he was bodiless! Yet, if he had no body, he was fully aware of resting on the bouyant inky blackness. He could faintly sense the resistance to his back. He could even press his formless body against it!

For a time he lay there, puzzling out this seeming paradox. How could nothingness press against nothingness so that there could be tangible resistance? His eyes wandered back to the fully gleaming star.

It was brighter now, and larger. It did not burn; it did not even glow; just a disc of blank whiteness in the all-enveloping blackness. Its bottom was flattened out curiously, a queer kind of serrated flatness. As he watched, aeons rolled by. From a vast distance he heard a soft voice whisper:

"His eyes are open, Doctor, otherwise no change."

He turned in the direction of the voice, yet was not conscious of any change of position. The resistance to his back was more determined; the waves of sleep had petrified into stiff little rucks; the white spot grew larger and clearer. Slowly, he realized that he was no longer cradled in velvety blackness, but was actually lying on a bed. That explained the resistance to his back; the creases in the bedclothes, his petrified waves.

THE white star was now the ward ceiling, and its serrated and flattened edge was the top of the screen surrounding his bed. Dimly he realised he was in hospital, somewhere. And gradually the memory of the Lagonda's wild skid, the jolt on mounting the pavement, the scattering pedestrians, the instant he arched through the air towards that

grim pile of concrete. So vivid was the memory that Arty Cameron screamed.

He shrieked with mind and soul—but no whisper came to his lips!

He turned his head from the agonising vision; thrust out his arms to ward off the blow—but in actuality he did not so much as flutter an eyelid!

A cold sweat seemed to envelop his mind. He could see, he could hear, but he was completely paralysed. Now time once more existed for him. He could sense the soft, sighing breaths as he inhaled and exhaled. He could hear the soft, but determined pulse of his heart. And so he lay, night succeeding day and day following night, immovable and unmoved. Many times he was fed and washed. He could feel everything they did to him; taste every morsel of food and drink; but move, no!

How queer, he thought, that though I am paralysed I can feel everything that contacts me. I always thought a paralytic was insensible to touch or pain.

The doctors hurt him and drove him almost mad when they made a test of his reflexes. When they needled the soles of his feet for reaction; when they needled, or pressed, or rubbed sensitive nervous spots of his body.

Again and again the silent screams cut across his mind. He struggled and fought to escape the thorough, remorseless examination, yet not even the expression of his eyes could change.

The House Surgeon grunted half humourously to the attendant nurse: "Blighter's dead, but won't lie down!" and Arty cursed him mentally with every shred of his ego. But to no purpose.

They left him alone after that. Once or twice the hated uniform of a policeman came across his line of vision, so that Arty was aware the authorities had not given up the hope of nabbing him and sending him down for yet another stretch.

But even this left Arty Cameron cold. He lay on his painless couch wondering how long he was to linger thus, ever wakeful; never able to sleep and always vividly conscious, unable to even blink an eye.

Whole eternities seemed to pass by. Then, without warning, there came a shrill buzzing in his head, like a rapidly plucked harp string. It grew shriller and shriller. The sustained humming made his very soul quiver in sympathy.

Mounting. Crescendo upon crescendo. Louder and yet louder.

Hummmmm! Hummmmm! Hummmmm!

ZING!

Arty Cameron felt sick unto death as with a final crashing chord, all sound ceased and his vision dimmed.

He felt himself tumble into bottomless space, turning over and over, slowly, as he plunged into inky blackness.

ZING!

Once again that soul searing note of utter confusion.

Then . . . blankness!

II

ARTY CAMERON sat up and nursed his aching head. His whole body still quivered from that final crashing cacaphony of inner vibration.

Feeling sick and dizzy, he struggled to his feet and stumbled a few paces. For some minutes he could not recollect his thoughts, then, as memory flooded back he gave a gasp.

Good God! He had been a paralytic, chained to a hospital bed, with a uniformed constable at his side waiting to arrest him for stealing a car the moment he had recovered; and now he was free and walking!

As the thought came to him he checked in mid-stride. He looked down at his body. He was utterly naked. His flesh was opalescent and glowing with a faint aura as of an electrical discharge! For some moments he toyed with the wild idea that he was dead and that this was his spirit form!

But if he were dead, then where was he? Heaven, Hell, or the Limbo of Idiots? He knelt down in the Stygian darkness and viewed the terrain by the glow of his body. The ground was smooth and cold and hard as if formed of iron. It was indeed iron, for here and there were rust flecks!

He got up greatly mystified. Which direction should he take? He shrugged. What did it matter; all directions were equal in this darkness. Without objective he would walk in a circle, anyway.

As he walked, strength poured back into him. His head cleared and his step grew lithe and springy. The darkness also seemed less intent now; his vision, without a doubt, was becoming attuned to the lack of light.

He became aware of a distant horizon, lit by a faint, purplish glow; and he also became aware of vague, amorphous forms drifting around him; jelly-like bladders of a slightly lighter shade than the all-pervading gloom.

They writhed and twisted like agonised souls and their shapes changed continuously. Some had long, trailing tendrils that whipped towards him. Others, suckers that opened and closed convulsively with faint slobbering sounds. Yet others were covered with coarse bristles or blotchy, leprous spots. One or two bumped into him, so that he screamed and beat them off wildly with flailing arms, as their cold, slimy contact shrivelled the soul within him.

He had one faint consolation. If these floating nightmares were utterly repulsive to him, he was apparently quite as loathsome to them. For they whirled rapidly away from his path, and those that did touch him seemed to shrivel with an inner revulsion of contact. Now his ears became attuned with their everlasting sighing, whispering and rustling.

Arty Cameron gave a sigh of relief as the floating horrors thinned out, so that his progress was now unhindered; and the purple horizon was now definitely closer, suggesting that this world was quite tiny, with a horizon never more than a mile or so distant.

ARTY paused. Though not versed in such matters, he was nevertheless conscious that he could be nowhere on Earth. That he must, in some miraculous manner, have reached the Moon or Mars, like a story-book character. No, it didn't fit in. His last conscious moments on Earth had been chained to a hospital bed. Then he must be dead, and this was Hell!

But where was the traditional fire and brimstone? Not to mention His Satanic Majesty and his Imps. Where the floating horrors imp? No, they were more horrified of him, than he of them, though he had been almost sick when he had first perceived them.

Arty gave it up. He did not waste time in useless speculation. He marched on steadily and tirelessly towards that purple horizon; and as he neared, he saw the dim, purplish glow came not from the entire horizon, but from a distinct area before him, and below his viewpoint.

Bent on discovery, he strode on, the purpling glow growing brighter and brighter, so that he now cast a long shadow behind him. The floating nightmares were now entirely absent, and it seemed evident that they kept to the dark portion of this miniature world and shunned light. No doubt the glow of his body had disturbed them most painfully.

At last he paused in mid-stride and stared dumb-founded at what the horizon had concealed. He crept closer, getting a full view of the weirdest scene imaginable.

The plain had a shallow, saucer-like depression about a thousand yards in diameter, and surrounding this natural bowl was a veritable carpet of blazing, living rubies!

From the centre of the declivity there rose a lonely tower about forty feet wide and a good hundred feet tall. Arty could see from where he stood, into the tower, which was roofless. A huge globe of shimmering light, vividly purple and blue, shot forth baleful rays.

Arty crept closer. An inner sense warned him he was approaching evil in its most horrible manifestation, but his eyes were on the carpet of rubies encircling the depression. A pocketful of them would set him up for life!

He slithered down the gently shelving declivity and reached the fringe of the carpet of rubies. All sense of impending evil died within him. The craze for this shimmering wealth swamped the last vestige of caution. Madly, he dropped to his knees and scooped up armfuls of the luminescent stones and let them pour over his figure.

III

HE remembered suddenly in the midst of his lustful craze, that he had no means of carrying away more than two fistfuls of this roseate wealth. Naked men have no pockets! So this meant a reduced load, but an equally valuable one if he picked with a fine sense of discrimination.

With infinite patience he scrabbled in the shimmering stones and began to select the largest and most perfect specimens he could find.

Suddenly, he paused. He held up one magnificent gem to the eerie light emanating from the iron tower. The sight sent a thrill of disgust coursing through him, for in the heart of the ruby was a black speck of pulsating, living matter! These rufous objects were eggs—some hellish spawn of this nightmare world! And a wisp of sanity asserted itself as he stepped hastily to a spot clear of the carpet of rubies.

Rubies were rough, shapeless masses normally; each of these red, richly glowing stones was perfectly cut in symmetrical facets and polished. No work of an Earthly lapidarist. The abnormality of the situation came home to him. Arty Cameron could not restrain the hysterical chuckle that bubbled to his lips.

A car thief stranded in an ocean of evil gems, in an insane caricature of a world, with its floating, shapeless, phototropic life-forms! Naked and helpless, not knowing how he had got to this place, yet conscious of the fact that he would leave his bones to bleach in the ruddy glow of this world born of a drug addict's diseased mind.

Suddenly, from the age old tower, a single beam of purple shot forth and caressed his body in a warm, soothing glow that was entirely assuring. His fear dropped from him like a cloak. No longer he hated this world, nor loathed its cold, slimy and formless inhabitants. Nor did any shudder of revulsion course through him as he trod the carpet of living rubies, each with its speck of horrid virality. Even the timeless iron tower in the centre of the depression had lost its aura of evil.

Entirely without sense of caution, Arty strode through the shaft of purple light, neither knowing nor caring what lay in store for him. He reached the ancient walls which held no doors or windows. He did not even wonder how the beam had come to pass through those metallic walls. An overpowering desire possessed him to enter this edifice and plumb its uttermost mysteries.

A slight thrill passed through his resistless body and he wafted like thistledown up and over the hundred foot high battlements. He drifted gently, lazily, over the gaping pit that yawned hungrily below him.

With a curious detachment he surveyed the depths below. He could see a huge mass, jelly-like, quivering and sentient; eyeless, yet regarding him with a baleful stare. The edges of the vast,

albuminous mass was oozing a vile, sticky fluid that coalesced at its edges into beads of perfect rubies! Every now and again, an egg-jewel would detach itself and soar out of the pit to join its companions on the rim of the depression.

For the first time a vague sense of uneasiness rippled through him. As if in sympathy, a ripple passed through the quivering mass below. Slowly, the vile jelly spun Arty's weightless body about with its fingers of light, as if it were examining its strange prize.

Without warning, the supporting beam of purple light vanished and Arty Cameron plunged down into that viscid mass of horror!

HE landed with a soft, squashy impact that sent waves across the face of the monstrous carcase. A spasm of fear gripped Arty as he felt his legs becoming slowly but surely engulfed in the mucous. He struggled but sank deeper into the living mass of now eagerly trembling vitality. He could sense its evil hunger to consume him body and soul.

Now he was ingested to the waist. He beat the quivering, yielding surface with his hands; puny fists that sank wrist deep in the writhing horror. Now sheer terror gripped him and a terrifying scream ripped from his throat.

Life! He was being swallowed by a pool of pure vitality! A life-hungry form that was in itself a mass of pulsating energy! With blinding reality he now realised those amorphous drifting globes were its children, spawned from its ruby eggs in countless generations in timeless space on a nightmare world of iron.

Now he was engulfed to his shoulders. With terrifying rapidity the ingestion was complete. A wave of blackness swept over Arty Cameron. Muffled screams filled his jelly-clogged mouth. A million searing fingers tore him apart. He felt a final overpowering wave of evil smother him, them . . .

ZING!

Arty Cameron groaned, rolled his head slightly, then became once more fixed in his cataleptic position. He realised he was back once more in his hospital bed, gazing at the same, old spot of ceiling and viewing the top of the screen.

"So he groaned and moved, did he?" he heard the House Surgeon remark to the Ward Sister. "Well, that's something, anyway, he will probably recover in time. Call me if he shows any signs of fresh movement."

Arty Cameron shuddered inwardly as he re-lived his nightmare experience. Yes, it must have been a nightmare. Such a place could not exist outside a disordered mind. Yet, was it possible for one to recall every detail so vividly as he could? To him it was no dream but an actual experience. Once again he gave an inward shudder of loathing and disgust.

As the nights and days succeeded each other, Arty grew more reassured. True, the tedium of that sleepless, unending gaze on the patch of ceiling bored him stiff.

Suddenly, without warning, it began again!

Hummmm! Hummmm! Hummmm!

ZING!

Arty Cameron could have shrieked with terror had he been able, not from the frightful agony in hearing that devilish chord beat madly through his head, but from sheer horror at the coming transition. He knew what to expect. Dear God, not that mad World of Iron, again! That filthy, viscid monster again!

Hummmm! Hummmm! Hummmm!

Though there was no outward movement, no change of expression in those vacantly staring eyes, he writhed and shrieked inwardly as the mounting torrent of devilish humming engulfed him.

Where was he going this time? What nightmare awaited him? Lucky was he, that he had no prevision; for an even more terrible experience was being prepared for him. A mental torture without compare was in the making!

Hummmm! Hummmm! Hummmm!

ZING!

IV

FOR a moment Arty Cameron did not realise that the ordeal of transition was over. He could still feel the soft, cool sheets covering him. A huge pillow was cradling his head in downy comfort.

He must still be in hospital, then. Nothing had happened, thank goodness! He opened one eye cautiously, gulped, closed it hastily. His hands gripped feverishly at the bedclothes. Yes, he was in bed. In a bed. But what bed? Where, oh, God, where?

This time he opened his eyes wide. He was resting in an enormous bed, covered with silken sheets and magnificently embroidered coverlets. Before him, nearly covering the wall, was a vast tapestry depicting a hunting scene. The work was marvellous and quite unearthly in its perfection. A slight draught caused faint ripples in the fabric which gave a pseudo-life to the scene. Arty Cameron was vaguely aware that the bold central figure on the beautifully caparisoned horse might well be his own double.

With a struggle Arty managed to prop himself up on one elbow and get a better view of the bed-chamber. He felt extremely weak and his body seemed to weigh a ton. But his weakness was forgotten as he drank in the appointments of the room. Hollywood was nowhere in comparison! This place began where the Celluloid City left off.

Arty Cameron felt dwarfed, crushed, when he realised the size of this barbaric bedroom. If he had been put to bed in the middle of Waterloo

Station, he still would not have felt so lost as he was in the vastness of this room.

To begin with, the walls were Cyclopean blocks of finely dressed granite. Each block must have scaled a hundred tons or more, and the smallest stone was larger than a double-decker omnibus! The walls rose for a sheer two hundred feet above his head. Gigantic roof beams of interlocked stones spanned the distant carved and coloured ceiling.

A hundred yards from his bed was a vast, open doorway. Each side of the door was flanked by a colossal seated statue over a hundred and fifty feet tall. They reminded him in a vague manner, of the photographs he had once seen of the great guardian statues of Rameses at the entrance to the temple at Abu Simbel. Only the monster guardians of this fantastic room were not human beings, but wolfhounds! They squatted on their haunches, gazing at him with their sightless stone eyes.

Arty Cameron let his mind dwell on what little he knew of Ancient Egypt. Well, one thing was certain; this room was most definitely not Egyptian in origin. There was none of that wide-eyed sculpturing of Egyptian art. Animals, too, were in correct proportions and the traditional sphinx and human head, and winged lions were conspicuously absent.

Before each of the Colossi a golden brazier of mammoth dimensions sent up a faint blue cloud of perfumed incense. Ranged round the walls were marble benches, small tables, great vases loaded with strange flowers of exotic hue and a golden gong swayed gently from alabaster supports. Huge rugs were scattered about the floor; and in the midst of this barbaric splendour, dwarfed by its surroundings, was the great couch on its dais.

Arty Cameron sat for awhile, drinking in the wild beauty of the room. Then he sank back, exhausted, on his pillow and gave a sigh of contentment. This was certainly a treat after all; better than that hellish nightmare he had so recently endured; and it was reassuring to know that the people in this strange place were about the same size as he. This was quite evident by the seats and tables in the room. And human, too, according to the great tapestry.

Arty turned his eyes to the tapestry once more. He revelled in its unearthly beauty. The strange trees of the unearthly forest; the weird monsters the central figure and his companions were hunting. It rather reminded Arty of the traditional portrayal of St. George and the Dragon, for the mounted man had also transfixed a monster with his spear. Underneath, set in stitched jewels in the border scrollwork, was the caption:

"Simbasis and the Rovik."

Arty blinked. Now how the hell had he been able to read that? Why, the characters were not even normal; a series of triangles and looped circles

with a lot of scattered crescents. Yet he instinctively knew his interpretation of the legend had been the correct one!

A SLIGHT sound from the distant doorway distracted his thoughts. A man in a long yellow robe entered the bedchamber. Two soldiers, clad like Ancient Roman centurions, now stood just within the doorway, their long, slender spears and square shields glimmering faintly. At a sign from the visitor, the two guards grounded their spears three times, and, with mechanical precision turned and marched out through the doorway.

Arty Cameron once again raised his sluggish body to a half-seated position and watched the yellow-clad figure approach. His visitor, he saw, was an old man, quite bald and with a face as yellow and creased as his gown. He carried a staff of office in his right hand; a slender, five-foot, gilded rod, terminating in a globe some six inches in diameter. An aura of evil smote Arty with almost physical force as the ancient approached the bed with slow, measured steps.

He stopped at the foot of the dais and raised his staff in salute. But, as he bent in obeisance, a glint of savage hatred and mockery flashed into his beady black eyes. Having made his ceremonial greeting, the old wretch shuffled up the six steps and came close to Arty Cameron.

Their eyes met and locked. The self same revulsion that had attacked Arty when he was confronted by the frightful Pool of Life on the Iron Planet, now coursed through him as he sensed the cruel and evil nature of his visitor.

The old man spoke softly. The language was melodious and liquid and once again Arty found himself able to comprehend the unknown tongue as he had understood its meaningless symbols on the tapestry.

"The mighty slayer of Roviks lies sore stricken?"

The old devil nodded to himself as if he were enjoying a great joke. Then he leaned forward. "Well, Simbasis, what now? Wouldst still be a priest as well as a king? You puny fool! For a thousand generations the Kings and the Priests have ruled the world. Never has a Priest wished to be King, nor a King to be Priest. But the Mighty Simbasis must be a King-Priest!

"Know now, the last chapter is about to be played. You may wield a mighty sword and spear, but we priests, with our magical arts know well how to protect ourselves. Your weakness and your dumbness are an enchantment. And now I come to cast the final spell, I pronounce the curse of the living death! Dead to all others but yourself! To see, to hear, to feel, yet to be for ever dead!"

The aura of evil surrounding the ancient priest seem to swell and burst its bonds in triumph. It engulfed Arty Cameron as he collapsed on his regal couch.

Swiftly the old man bent over his royal victim and gave him a scrutiny in which he drank in his victory. He gave a chuckle of evil delight.

V

THE wicked old devil raised his staff and gave Arty another mocking salute. Then he tottered to the great golden gong. He smote it three times with his staff.

Resonant waves of sound crashed round the cavernous room. In the distance other gongs caught up and relayed the summons, so that the whole monstrous edifice vibrated with a medley of golden notes.

A vast crowd gathered in the royal death chamber. Courtiers, soldiers, ministers, priests in their yellow robes. The old man stood at the foot of the dais.

"Simbasis the Mighty is dead! Simbasis the Mighty has journeyed to the Enchanted Forest! May the Gods grant him eternal sport!"

At these words a hush fell over the concourse. Arty Cameron could feel the waves of sorrow flooding the room. He fought to raise himself, to reassure them that he was not dead. But his body did not respond to his will—as he had been chained to that hospital bed somewhere in Space and Time, so was he now chained to this regal death bed. A living spirit in dead clay.

The magic spell was too potent. God knows to what remote age he had been transplanted, but it was an age where magic laws and principles functioned powerfully. Then he realised that this was no magic spell, but hypnotism.

Hypnotism in its most advanced form, so that a cataleptic condition could be induced to completely simulate death; no breath, no heart or pulse. A false rigor mortis would set in. He was indeed under a spell of living death.

A woman in gorgeous raiment broke free from her attendants and flung herself across his body.

"Simbasis! Oh, Simbasis, Simbasis, come back to me!"

Her agonised cry tore at Arty Cameron's core with a pathos well nigh unbearable. His Queen! Curious, he came to think of himself as Simbasis; not a petty car thief of distant, Twentieth Century London.

The swine! The cruel, yellow devil! The prostrate woman was gently raised from him. Now he saw her unearthly beauty and grace. She was young, yet every inch a fitting mate to the Mighty Simbasis. She shook off her attendants. Turning to the ancient Priest, she cried: "Let the rites be carried out!"

"The full, age-old rites?" the oldster croaked with an eager gusto that sounded strange in this death room.

"The full rites, Kubinas!"

Kubinas? So that was the old swine's name, Arty mused.



OLD Kubinas betrayed his satisfaction but slightly, for he once more had his eagerness under control. But that he was more than delighted, Arty was aware. What were the full rites? The ex-car thief pondered over this uneasily. It was something very undesirable from his point of view, if it gave the old devil satisfaction.

Kubinas hobbled away. The courtiers filed out. Soldiers formed a guard round the royal death bed. Servitors hurried in and began their ministrations. They stripped his cooling and already setting body and anointed him with perfumed oils and clad him in gorgeous raiment. A silken robe of scarlet; a gold and white fur cape; a magnificent surcoat of red, black and gold; a shimmering neckless of precious stones worth a king's ransom.

Then a royal diadem was set on his brow. Jewelled bangles adorned his wrists and ankles.

God! Were they going to bury him alive? It was fortunate that Arty Cameron could not see into the future, for the royal death rites were far more terrible than burial alive could ever be!

The Queen entered after the servitors had departed. At a signal from her, the guards also took their leave. She was alone with the corpse. Swiftly she bent and gently kissed his cold, rigid lips and her warm tears moistened his chin. Arty struggled mightily to warn her, to tell her he was not dead but under a hyponotic spell.

She stood up. "Good-bye, beloved one. See, soon we shall be together for all time. Here is the cord that shall bind us together for ever!"

Two yellow gowned priests entered the chamber. To them she bowed low. They raised their hands in silent blessing. Then one took the cord of silk from her.

"Be quick and merciful, good friends," she whispered. "Quick! Tightly! As tightly as possible!"

Sitting herself on the death couch, by Arty Cameron's side, she folded her hands on her lap.

Arty Cameron watched with fixed gaze at the tragedy. One priest gave the silken cord a single turn about the white neck and his companion took the free end, whilst he held on to the other. Together, the two priests pulled with all their strength. The cord cut into the pale skin till it was buried from sight in a fold of flesh.

For a full minute Arty Cameron went mad within his cold, rigid shell. If he couldn't stop them, could not save her, then, dear God, close my eyes, let met turn my head aside, stop my ears! And before his eyes the Queen's lovely face turned purple. The wondrous orbs started from their sockets. Her hands fluttered feebly to her throat. The priests held tight, panted as she struggled, and hoarsely intoned a service for the dead!

It was done! Reverently, they picked her up and laid her still body beside his. He was glad he could no longer see that face, now blue, with the swollen tongue lolling out and the cord still trailing from her throat.

The full rites!

What age and what land was this that had climbed so high in the arts and sciences, to build this mighty palace, to fashion such marvellous tapestries and carvings, and to practise such barbaric, such savage funeral rites for its royalty?

The body beside him grew cold and stiffened in death.

Arty groaned silently.

VI

THE passage of time was unmarked in the royal death chamber. In the perpetual glow whose source was hidden, there was neither brightening nor dimming.

Arty Cameron lay in his quiescent position, inwardly fretting and vaguely alarmed. Serving women came in and tended the Queen's body. Her corpse was stripped, anointed and bound in long linen bandages much after the style of an Egyptian mummy. A wondrous gold death mask was set over her empurpled features, mercifully concealing the distorted face and ghastly, staring eyes.

Then two litters were brought in. Priests, chanting a funeral dirge, reverently laid the bodies on them. In a solemn procession, flanked by soldiers in their Romanesque accoutrements they emerged from the palace, with Arty Cameron's litter in the lead.

From his recumbent position, set high on the shoulders of gigantic negro slaves, Arty could see very little apart from a sky of amazingly deep blue. Luckily for him, the sun was low, or his wide, vacant eyes would have been scared.

They descended a great tier of steps to the tessellated square before the palace. Beyond, as the litter tilted slightly, Arty could see a mile-long double row of great columns, each some two hundred feet high, and with the girth of a great oak. Each column was carved and coloured and surmounted with a broad, square platform. Every pillar bore its burden of humanity, all dwarfed by the gigantic proportions of the avenue.

At regularly spaced intervals between each pillar, was a colossal plinth bearing the effigy of a wolf-hound not unlike an Alsatian in appearance. These marble monsters were all depicted in the same attitude; head back and ears flattened, sharp-fanged jaws opened, baying to the sky.

The avenue ended at the foot of a pyramidal flight of steps. The cone shaped structure raised its vast mass some five hundred feet and the stairs were punctuated with broad landings and marble seats for the repose of the weary climbers. The top of the pyramid was a truncated cone; an enormous platform bearing a building not unlike the Parthenon in shape. But it had a flat roof, and mounted above this building was a colossal baying wolf-hound, feet straddling from wall to wall.

Though jolted considerably, Arty Cameron, for all his terrible plight, drank in the beautifully weird scene, with its colourful mourning crowds, the trumpeters, musicians, priests, slaves and soldiers.

But one thing that impressed him above all other was the absence of dwellings. Apart from the avenue of inter-mingled columns and howling dogs, and the distant temple on its pyramid, there were no other structures. The avenue was fringed with flower beds, and beyond that a straggly growth of palms and cactus. After that, nothing but endless, rolling plains of sand. A desert of drab, pale yellow.

Even Egypt had set her cities and temples and palaces in the fertile belt bordering the Nile. But these people lived remote from any tillable soil and life-giving waters, and the avenue was lined with countless thousands! How did they live, feed, drink and cleanse themselves in this barren desert, he pondered, as the procession wended its leisurely way.

THE musicians played and chanted their mournful airs as the cortege, several hundred strong, walked in slow steps, and above their sad dirge and the weeping multitude came the distant howling of a dog—the long drawn death howl!

It rose in a succession of howls, keening through the sounds of the lamenting crowds, sustained a

piercing note for an unearthly length of time, then died away with a final sharp yelp, only to be repeated.

Arty Cameron shuddered inwardly to the sound of that ghastly death cry, it was utterly unnerving, and as they progressed, the howling of the dog grew louder and ever more sustained.

At the foot of the pyramidal steps, the evil old priest, Kubinas, with a crowd of acolytes, greeted the cortege with low bows. The procession came to a stop. The litters were set down and the negro slaves bowed and retreated on hands and knees. At a sign from the mitred Kubinas, acolytes sprang forward and raised the litters. For the first time Arty noticed that the pyramidal flight of steps were divided by a fifty-foot wide ramp of rose coloured marble, with a raised border of delicately carved scrollwork.

The priests bearing his litter took the right hand flight, whilst the Queen's body was borne aloft by the other flight. The two processions mounted the endless stairs in perfect unison.

Kubinas led the King's cortege, his globular-ended staff striking each in succession as they ascended. A similarly clad High Priest, also bearing a golden staff topped with a six inch cube preceded the Queen's litter. He, too, struck each step with his staff, and each time Kubinas and his counterpart struck the steps, a short, sharp yelp emerged from the stone throat of the gigantic wolf-hound surmounting the temple above them!

Gripped by the weirdness of it all, Arty Cameron for the time being forgot all about his terrible predicament. At each landing the litters were set down, and to the death howl of the temple hound, a fresh set of acolytes would take over the burdens; and as they mounted, Arty could not but marvel at the vastness of the pyramid which dwarfed those of the Egyptians, nor was his wonder any the less for the beauty of the temple above them, or the perfect proportions of the hundred foot tall, sculptured wolf-hound that crowned the whole mighty edifice.

At last the twin cortege reached the final platform. The two High Priests bowed low to each other. Meanwhile, Arty felt the acolytes pass jewelled straps about his body and then tilt his litter to an upright position so that he could gaze on the panorama before and below him.

VII

A MILE away the colossal palace reared its dark, rough granite bulk to the heavens. It was cubic in shape, about a mile in length on each side, and over two thousand feet high. Arty made a shrewd guess that it was more than a palace; it was an entire city in one building. A single building to house the entire populace!

But now his gaze was focussed on the Queen's litter which had been brought within the range of his fixed vision.

"Let not the Temple be desecrated by a woman's presence!" and with these words the evil Kubinas raised his staff.

The acolytes tipped the litter. The Queen, in her tightly swathed bandages, slid forward and struck the roseate ramp. It left the litter and began to slither down the smooth marble chute. It gathered speed and went bounding down. The corpse leaped and cavorted like a living thing. The gold death mask fell away, exposing the bloated features, her black tresses escaped from the golden net she wore. Down, down, down!

A great cry rose from the multitude, five hundred feet below, as the body came to rest. A fanfare shrilled out from the massed trumpeters. The crowd milled excitedly and scattered to fresh positions between great pillars and the statues of the baying wolf-hounds. Another fanfare shrilled. The great hound above the temple began its death howl anew, and, as if this were a signal, another ghastly rite began.

From the flat platforms surmounting the two hundred foot tall pillars, soldiers urged palace slaves with sword points to take the death leap! Shrieks, screams and wails tore through the air as score upon score of the poor wretches plunged to their doom. Like the ancient Assyrians, these people killed off the slaves that they may serve their dead master and mistress in the after-life.

The last body hurtled to the tiles. The last terrified wail died away. The Great Hound became mute.

Kubinas raised his staff. At this signal, the acolytes once more shouldered the King's litter. Now the procession entered the Temple and a chill, menacing gloom enveloped them. They came to a halt before the effigy of a huge hound which squatted upright on its haunches. It was made of brass and gave a dull gleam in the half light.

ARTY was unstrapped from his litter. Deftly, acolytes stripped him of his diadem and jewels. His regal attire was removed so that he was left clad solely in the scarlet silk robe. They raised him and propped him up in a bronze throne and passed a bronze chain about him to keep him in a seated position. They retreated and Kubinas stepped forward, swinging a censer. The pungent fumes of smouldering incense enveloped them as the wicked old priest began to make a religious by-play over him. Arty heard the old devil whispering:

"Enjoying yourself, Simbasis? Did you like the performance of your devoted slaves? The self-sacrifice of your Queen? Think, your children will be in my hands, henceforth, as will be the kingdom! Not a king-priest after all, but a priest-king instead! And now to your roasting! And you will not get the merciful treatment accorded to ordinary sacrifices. The fires will not suffocate you! Agony will not make you swoon! In the furnace you will get no release till every particle of your

body is consumed ! Farewell, Simbasis, the King who would be priest ! ”

The High Priest's hatred was a living thing, and as he uttered his farewell, he bowed low and stepped back.

To Arty Cameron's horror, the brass belly of the seated dog dropped forward with a smooth action, between the straddled forelegs, to form a ramp. From within the brazen hound flames curled hungrily and a wave of suffocating heat enveloped the assemblage.

Out of the gloom above, a chain ending in a hook came down with a gentle clinking sound. Kubinas seized the book and inserted it into the loop in the chair back. Three times he smote the ground with his staff. The priest took up a chant of farewell to their dead King ; and, as if the chant were a signal, Arty felt himself whirled aloft. His chair spun dizzily and he was bathed in a searing blast of superheated air as his bronze chair clanked heavily on the ramp. The hook swung clear.

“Farewell, oh, Simbasis the Mighty ! Farewell ! Farewell ! Farewell !”

From above the Temple the great stone hound set up his ululation. Distant fanfares blared out. With a gentle quiver the ramp began to rise !

Arty Cameron went raving mad in that instant. Encased in that already dead body, powerless to even avert his gaze, tortured beyond endurance, yet unable to die, unable even to swoon, he glared into the flaming bowels of the god-dog, whilst his chair began a slow, shuddering slither. The red hot metal scorched the soles of his feet. His toes curled and a faint spluttering came from them as an indescribable agony shot through him.

With a final lurch, the bronze seat toppled over and carried its living-dead burden into the heart of the furnace ! With a mighty clang, the ramp shut tight. The flames leaped into fierce activity.

Arty Cameron screamed. No sound but the roar of the fires and the hissing and popping of shrivelling flesh.

Arty screamed again and again !

Then . . .

ZING !

EPILOGUE

The patients stirred uneasily as scream after scream tore through the hospital ward. The night nurse hurried over and helped the policeman to restrain the wildly plunging Arty Cameron from completely leaving his bed. Finally he quietened down and the nurse sent for the House Surgeon.

A brief examination revealed that the cataleptic condition had passed off. Dr. Schrodinger was sent for.

“He won't last long,” the House Surgeon observed. “The violence of his paroxysm has completely burnt him out.”

But it was other fires that had burnt Arty Cameron to death, and with the coming of morning the doctors listened to his tale. The policeman was not present, the authorities having already been informed that Arty Cameron would not live to face the charge of stealing the Lagonda.

So they listened to his story, told with a vividness that was not natural in such an uncouth and uneducated man. Dr. Schrodinger put in a question here and there.

When he came to an end, and was resting, the two medico's conversed softly. The specialist shrugged as the House Surgeon put a leading question.

“I don't know what really happened. Take the first experience. I believe he projected himself into an alien dimension, his glowing body is proof enough. He was regarding his etheric, ultra-violet aura.” Dr. Schrodinger shook his head as if he doubted his own explanation.

“As for the Temple of the Howling Dog,” he continued, “either Cameron passed through the Space-Time Continuum to a remote past or forward to an even more remote future. He visited what ? Atlantis ? Lemuria ? Perhaps an even older, unknown civilisation. Or into the dying days of mankind a million years to come ? Who shall say which ?”

“But how, Schrodinger, how ? Other patients have dreams born of delirium, but this . . .”

“I believe I must have done something to his brain when I trimmed the frontal lobe. Affected part of the Silent Area. In antiquity, and even to-day, amongst the mystics of the East, manifestations of well-nigh supernatural powers are to be witnessed. Levitation, self-induced catalepsy, prophecy and God knows what. Nature does not create without purpose. What are the Silent Areas of the brain for ? We use less than one-fifth of our brains. What is the purpose, the function, of the other four-fifths ?”

Arty Cameron stirred, sat up, groaned and began to claw the House Surgeon's arm.

“Stop it ! Stop it !” he screamed. “That terrible humming. It's started again ! God help me—what next ? What next ?”

They eased him back. Schrodinger pressed his hand to the man's fevered brow. A faint tingle coursed through the palm of his hand. With a startled oath, Schrodinger pulled it away and applied his stethoscope. An expression of amazement spread over his features.

“It's the silver plate I put in place of his frontal bone,” he whispered in awe to the House Surgeon. “It's vibrating and humming like the deuce !”

He listened for a little time, then gave a sharp exclamation and pulled his stethoscope away. “It gave an audible twang or zing !” he cried. “Nearly deafened me. My God ! That's it ! The silver plate was the cause. Silver is a conductor. It

made an electrical bridge over the Fissure of Sylvius! Even the three-membranes, Pia Mater, Dura Mater and Arachnoid Membrane could not short-circuit it."

They looked at the still body of Arty Cameron, silently, the House Surgeon drew up the sheet over that tortured face.

"Well, he's at rest now, poor devil. He won't zing again."

They walked away, Schrodinger deep in thought.

"What are you thinking of now?"

Schrodinger faced his companion. "Of that poor man. I wonder if he's now eternally resting, or . . . ?"

"Or what?"

"Or if the third transition was completed before he died. To experience a fresh nightmare for ever and ever, without escape?"

"Shut up! That'd be worse than Hell!"

In silence the doctors left the ward.

THE END

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

THE NEXT ISSUE will fill many requests for longer stories as opposed to a lead novel and several short stories, for we are presenting four novelettes—which should make the story ratings a close competition.

The lead story goes to John Brody with "World In Shadow" a fine story of the world running smoothly upon atomic power plants—only there is a lack of skilled technicians to assemble a spaceship from the blueprint stage. In fact, everyone is so highly skilled at an individual job there is no one to co-ordinate the whole. It makes a fascinating story—and, incidentally, Brody walked away with second place for his short story "Foreign Body" in the second issue.

We also have an interesting story of mutations in "Bighead," by William de Koven, which deals with two types of humanity battling for racial supremacy. John Aiken comes in with a delightful end-of-the-world story entitled "Edge Of Night," and to balance the novelettes there is "Was Not Spoken," by E. Everett Evans, which gets its "future" mixed up with Atlantis.

Patrick Selby returns with a short story and there is also one of the far distances of space by a new author Norman Lazenby. All in all a highly controversial issue.

In our last issue we requested a readers' opinion upon whether to publish a letter section in each issue. The response to this shows a fairly even vote for and against, so we have decided that for the time being, until we can hit a regular publishing schedule, it shall remain in obedience, although we have plenty of interesting "copy" of a most controversial nature.

Story ratings for the second issue were keenly contested, although there was a wide gap between third and fourth place. Outstanding achievement was the rating of Brody's short story in second place, which was very close behind the lead novel.

1. The Living Lies	JOHN BEYNON
2. Foreign Body	JOHN BRODY
3. Vicious Circle	POLTON CROSS
4. The Micro Man	ALDEN LORRAINE
5. Green Spheres	W. P. COCKCROFT
6. Spaceship 13	PATRICK S. SELBY
7. Lunar Concession	THORNTON AYRE

Both articles were exceptionally well received and we intend featuring more in future issues.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

"WORLD IN SHADOW"

BY JOHN BRODY



INHERITANCE

BY CHARLES WILLIS

Space flight, when it is achieved, won't come in one day. It is more likely to be built up by the slow process of trial and error over a long period.

AS David said, when one falls on Africa from a height of two hundred and fifty kilometers, a broken ankle may be an anti-climax but is none the less painful. But what hurt him most, he pretended, was the way we had all rushed out into the desert to see what had happened to the A.20 and hadn't come near him until hours later.

"Be logical, David," Jimmy Langford had protested. "We knew that you were O.K. because the base 'copter radioed when it picked you up. But the A.20 might have been a complete write-off."

"There's only one A.20," I said, trying to be helpful, "but rocket test-pilots are—well, if not two a penny, at any rate seven for sixpence."

David glared back at us from beneath his bushy eyebrows and said something in Welsh.

"The Druid's curse," Jimmy remarked to me. "Any moment now you'll turn into a leek or a perspex model of Stonehenge."

You see, we were still pretty lightheaded and it wouldn't do to be serious for a while. Even David's iron nerve must have taken a terrific beating, yet somehow he seemed the calmest of us all. I couldn't understand it—then.

The A.20 had come down fifty kilometers from her launching point. We'd followed her by radar for the whole trajectory, so we knew her position to within a few meters—though we didn't know at the

time that David had landed ten kilometers further east.

The first warning of disaster had come seventy seconds after takeoff. The A.20 had reached fifty kilometers and was following the correct trajectory to within a few percent. As far as the eye could tell, the luminous track on the radar screen had scarcely deviated from the pre-computed path. David was doing two kilometers a second: not much, but the fastest any man had ever travelled up to then. And *Goliath* was just about to be jettisoned.

The A.20 was a two-step rocket. It had to be, for it was using chemical fuels. The upper component, with its tiny cabin, its folded aerofoils and flaps, weighed just under twenty tons when fully fuelled. It was to be lifted by a lower two-hundred-ton booster which would take it up to fifty kilometers, after which it could carry on quite happily under its own power. The big fellow would then drop back to earth by parachute. It wouldn't weigh much when its fuel was burnt. Meanwhile, the upper step would have built up enough speed to reach the six hundred kilometer level before falling back and going into a glide that would take David halfway round the world if he wished.

I DON'T remember who called the two rockets *David* and *Goliath*, but the names caught on at

once. Having two Davids around caused a lot of confusion, not all of it accidental.

Well, that was the theory, but as we watched the tiny green spot on the screen fall away from its calculated course, we knew that something had gone wrong. And we guessed what it was.

At fifty kilometers the spot should have divided in two. The brighter echo should have continued to rise as a free projectile, and then fallen back to Earth. But the other should have gone on, still accelerating, drawing swiftly away from the discarded booster.

There had been no separation. The empty *Goliath* had refused to come free and was dragging *David* back to Earth—helplessly, for *David's* motors could not be used. Their exhausts were blocked by the machine beneath.

We saw all this in about ten seconds. We waited just long enough to calculate the new trajectory, and then we climbed into the 'copters and set off for the target area.

All we expected to find, of course, was a heap of magnesium looking as if a bulldozer had gone over it. We knew that *Goliath* couldn't eject his parachute while *David* was sitting on top of him, any more than *David* could use his motors while *Goliath* was clinging beneath. I remember wondering who was going to break the news to Mavis, and then realising that she'd be listening to the radio and would know all about it as soon as anyone.

We could scarcely believe our eyes when we found the two rockets still coupled together, lying undamaged beneath the big parachute. There was no sign of *David*, but a few minutes later Base called to say that he'd been found. The plotters at Number Two Station had picked up the tiny echo from his parachute and sent a 'copter to collect him. He was in hospital twenty minutes later, but we stayed out in the desert for several hours checking over the machines and making arrangements to retrieve them.

When at last we got back to Base, we were pleased to see our best-hated science-reporters among the mob being held at bay. We waved aside their protests and sailed on into the ward.

The shock and the subsequent relief had left us all feeling rather irresponsible and perhaps childish. Only *David* seemed unaffected; the fact that he'd just had one of the most miraculous escapes in human history hadn't made him turn a hair. He sat there in the bed pretending to be annoyed at our jibes until we'd calmed down.

"Well," said Jimmy at last, "what went wrong?"

"That's for you to discover," *David* replied. "*Goliath* went like a dream until fuel-cutoff point. I waited then for the five-second pause before the explosive bolts detonated and the springs threw him clear, but nothing happened. So I punched the emergency release. The lights dimmed, but the kick I'd expected never came. I tried a couple more times but somehow I knew it was useless. I guessed that something had shorted in the detonator circuit and was earthing the power supply.

"Well, I did some rather rapid calculations from the flight charts and abacs in the cabin. At my present speed I'd continue to rise for another two hundred kilometers and would reach the peak of my trajectory in about three minutes. Then I'd start

the two hundred and fifty kilometer fall and should make a nice hole in the desert four minutes later. All told, I seemed to have a good seven minutes of life left—ignoring air-resistance, to use your favourite phrase. That might add a couple of minutes to my expectation of life.

"I knew that I couldn't get the big parachute out, and *David's* wings would be useless with the forty-ton mass of *Goliath* on his tail. I'd used up two of my seven minutes before I decided what to do.

"It's a good job I made you widen that airlock. Even so, it was a squeeze to get through it in my spacesuit. I tied the end of the safety rope to a locking lever and crawled along the hull until I reached the junction of the two steps.

"THE parachute compartment couldn't be opened from the outside, but I'd taken the emergency axe from the pilot's cabin. It didn't take long to get through the magnesium skin: once it had been punctured I could almost tear it apart with my hands. A few seconds later I'd released the 'chute. The silk floated aimlessly around me; I had expected some trace of air resistance at this speed but there wasn't a sign of it. The canopy simply stayed where it was put. I could only hope that when we re-entered atmosphere it would spread itself without fouling the rocket.

"I thought I had a fairly good chance of getting away with it. The additional weight of *David* would increase the loading of the parachute by less than twenty per cent., but there was always the chance that the shrouds would chafe against the broken metal and be worn through before I could reach Earth. In addition the canopy would be distorted when it did open, owing to the unequal lengths of the cords. There was nothing I could do about that.

"When I'd finished, I looked about me for the first time. I couldn't see very well, for perspiration had misted over the glass of my suit—someone had better look into that: it can be dangerous. I was still rising, though very slowly now. To the north-east I could see the whole of Sicily and some of the Italian mainland; further south I could follow the Libyan coast as far as Benghazi. Spread out beneath me was all the land over which Alexander and Montgomery and Rommel had fought when I was a boy. It seemed rather surprising that anyone had ever made such a fuss about it.

"I didn't stay long: in three minutes I would be entering the atmosphere. I took a last look at the flaccid parachute, straightened some of the shrouds, and climbed back into the cabin. Then I jettisoned *David's* fuel—first the oxygen, and then, as soon as it had had time to disperse, the alcohol.

"That three minutes seemed an awful long time. I was just over twenty-five kilometers high when I heard the first sound. It was a very high-pitched whistle, so faint that I could scarcely hear it. Glancing through the portholes I saw that the parachute shrouds were becoming taut and the canopy was beginning to billow above me. At the same time I felt weight returning and knew that the rocket was beginning to decelerate.

"The calculation wasn't very encouraging. I'd fallen free for over two hundred kilometers and if I was to stop in time I'd need an average deceleration of ten gravities. The peaks might be twice that,

but I'd stood fifteen before now in a lesser cause. So I gave myself a double shot of dynocaine and uncaged the gimbals of my seat. I remember wondering whether I should let out David's little wings, and decided that it wouldn't help. Then I must have blacked out.

"When I came round again it was very hot, and I had normal weight. I felt very stiff and sore, and to make matters worse the cabin was oscillating violently. I struggled to the port and saw that the desert was uncomfortably close. The big parachute had done its work, but I thought that the impact was going to be rather too violent for comfort. So I jumped.

"From what you tell me I'd have done better to have stayed in the ship. But I don't suppose I can grumble."

WE sat in silence for a while. Then Jimmy remarked casually:

"The accelerometer shows that you touched twenty-one gravities on the way down. Only for three seconds, though. Most of the time it was between twelve and fifteen."

David didn't seem to hear and presently I said:

"Well, we can't hold the reporters off much longer. Do you feel like seeing them?"

David hesitated.

"No," he answered. "Not now."

He read our faces and shook his head violently.

"No," he said with emphasis, "it's not that at all. I'd be willing to take off again right now. But I want to sit and think things over for a while."

His voice sank, and when he spoke again it was to show the real David behind the perpetual mask of extraversion.

"You think I haven't any nerves," he said, "and that I take risks without bothering about the consequences. Well, that isn't quite true and I'd like you to know why. I've never told anyone this, not even Mavis.

"You know I'm not superstitious," he began, a little apologetically, "but most materialists have some secret reservations, even if they won't admit them.

"Many years ago I had a peculiarly vivid dream. By itself, it wouldn't have meant much, but later I discovered that two other men had put almost identical experiences on record. One you've probably read, for the man was J. W. Dunne.

"In his first book, 'An Experiment With Time,' Dunne tells how he once dreamed that he was sitting at the controls of a curious flying machine with swept-back wings, and years later the whole experience came true when he was testing his inherent stability aeroplane. Remembering my own dream, which I'd had before reading Dunne's book, this made a considerable impression on me. But the second incident I found even more striking.

"You've heard of Igor Sikorsky: he designed some of the first commercial long-distance flying-boats—Clippers they were called. In his autobiography, 'The Story of the Flying S,' he tells us how he had a dream very similar to Dunne's.

"He was walking along a corridor with doors opening on either side and electric lights glowing overhead. There was a slight vibration underfoot and somehow he knew that he was in a flying

machine. Yet at that time there were no aeroplanes in the world, and few people believed there ever would be.

"Sikorsky's dream, like Dunne's, came true many years later. He was on the maiden flight of his first Clipper when he found himself walking along that familiar corridor."

David laughed, a little self-consciously.

"You've probably guessed what my dream was about," he continued. "Remember, it would have made no permanent impression if I hadn't come across these parallel cases.

"I was in a small, bare room with no windows. There were two other men with me, and we were all wearing what I thought at the time were diving-suits. I had a curious control panel in front of me, with a circular screen built into it. There was a picture on the screen, but it didn't mean anything to me and I can't recall it now, though I've tried many times since. All I remember is turning to the other two men and saying: 'Five minutes to go, boys'—though I'm not sure if those were the exact words. And then, of course, I woke up.

"That dream has haunted me ever since I became a test pilot. No—haunted isn't the right word. It's given me confidence that in the long run everything would be alright—at least until I'm in that cabin with those other two men. What happens after that I don't know. But now you understand why I felt quite safe when I brought down the A.20 and when I crashlanded the A.15 off Pantelleria.

"So now you know. You can laugh if you please: I sometimes do myself. But even if there's nothing in it, that dream's given my subconscious a boost that's been pretty useful."

We didn't laugh, and presently Jimmy said:—

"Those other men—do you recognise them?"

David looked doubtful.

"I've never made up my mind," he answered. "Remember, they were wearing spacesuits and I didn't see their faces clearly. But one of them looked rather like you, though he seemed a good deal older than you are now. I'm afraid you weren't there, Arthur. Sorry."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "As I've told you before, I'll have to stay behind to explain what went wrong. I'm quite content to wait until the passenger service starts."

Jimmy rose to his feet.

"O.K., David," he said, "I'll deal with the gang outside. Get some sleep now—with or without dreams. And by the way, the A.20 will be ready again in a week. I think she'll be the last of the chemical rockets: they say the atomic drive's nearly ready for us."

WE never spoke of David's dream again, but I think it was often in our minds. Three months later he took the A.20 up to six hundred and eighty kilometers, a record which will never be broken by a machine of this type, because no-one will ever build a chemical rocket again. David's uneventful landing in the Nile Valley marked the end of an epoch.

It was three years before the A.21 was ready. She looked very small compared with her giant predecessors, and it was hard to believe that she was the nearest thing to a spaceship man had yet built. This time the takeoff was from sea level, and the

Atlas Mountains, which had witnessed the start of our earlier shots, were now merely the distant background to the scene.

By now both Jimmy and I had come to share David's belief in his own destiny. I remember Jimmy's parting words as the airlock closed.

"It won't be long now, David, before we build that three-man ship."

And I knew he was only half joking.

We saw the A.21 climb slowly into the sky in great, widening circles, unlike any rocket the world had ever known before. There was no need to worry about gravitational loss now that we had a built-in fuel supply, and David wasn't in a hurry. The machine was still travelling quite slowly when I lost sight of it and went into the plotting room.

When I got there the signal was just fading from the screens, and the detonation reached me a little later. And that was the end of David and his dreams.

The next I recall of that period is flying down the Conway Valley in Jimmy's 'copter, with Snowdon gleaming far away on our right. We had never been to David's home before and were not looking forward to this visit. But it was the least that we could do.

As the mountains drifted beneath us we talked about the suddenly darkened future and wondered what the next step would be. Apart from the shock of personal loss, we were beginning to realise how

much of David's confidence we had come to share ourselves. And now that confidence had been shattered.

We wondered what Mavis would do, and discussed the boy's future. 'He must be fifteen now, though I hadn't seen him for several years and Jimmy had never met him at all. According to his father he was going to be an architect and already showed considerable promise.

Mavis was quite calm and collected, though she seemed much older than when I had last met her. For a while we talked about business matters and the disposal of David's estate. I'd never been an executor before, but tried to pretend that I knew all about it.

We had just started to discuss the boy when we heard the front door open and he came into the house. Mavis called to him and his footsteps came slowly along the passage. We could tell that he didn't want to meet us, and his eyes were still red when he entered the room.

I had forgotten how much like his father he was, and I heard a little gasp from Jimmy.

"Hello, David," I said.

But he didn't look at me. He was staring at Jimmy, with that puzzled expression of a man who has seen someone before but can't remember where.

And quite suddenly I knew that young David would never be an architect.

THE END.

COMPETITION

To enable us to gauge more clearly the type of stories you prefer and to help us build this magazine into one which has universal reader approval, we invite you to enter this simple voting competition.

★ ★ ★

All you have to do is write down on a postcard or letter the titles of the stories in this issue in the order you most enjoyed them. List all the six stories and then send your entry to NEW WORLDS, PENDULUM PUBLICATIONS LIMITED, 10, OLD SQUARE, LINCOLNS INN, LONDON, W.C. 2, marking the top left-hand corner of the envelope "Competition."

★ ★ ★

From your votes we will then compile the story results for the "Literary Line-up" and we offer a cash prize of

FIVE GUINEAS

to the reader who correctly places the six stories in order of popularity, or who is nearest to the correct list. In the event of a tie the prize money will be shared between the winning entrants.

★ ★ ★

Closing date for entries is 15th October, 1947, and the result will be published in our next issue. In all matters relating to this competition the editor's decision is final and no correspondence concerning it will be entered into.



THE INEXORABLE LAWS

BY JOHN BRODY

In the star lanes men from Earth will have to sink their quarrels and jealousies for the benefit of Mankind. Which makes it awkward when life-long enemies meet.

THE *Constellation* lifted her prow and, as the drive was stepped up, began to surge forward, rising rapidly and banking into a graceful sweep. For a moment her powerful jets gave her a comet's tail, and then, as she cleared the thin atmosphere of the planet, she vanished into the darkness of outer space.

"Nice, sociable sort of chap, the skipper," a fitter observed as he watched the passage of the space ship. "Here we are, stuck on a perishing planet ten light years from Terra, seeing a new face once in six months, and he can't stop long enough to tell us the flaming news. I'll bet his crew love him."

The station commander, at his side, was an older man, and recently returned from a furlough on Terra.

"That was Leroy," he said.

"Leroy?" the fitter said. "Leroy? Wasn't that the guy who stepped on the drive to supra-light speeds?"

"That was this skipper's father. This bird was the one who did those exploratory trips to Betelgeuse."

"Oh! Well, since you know so much, cap'n, what was it he wanted to know 'bout Bronberg, eh?"

"Leroy wants to catch up with Bronberg."

"What for?"

"To slit his guts."

The fitter whistled. "Say!" he said. "That's not ethical, cap'n. Beyond the field of Sol all men

must stick together. Otherwise mankind will perish. That's what I was taught at school."

"Maybe, but Leroy's a law unto himself."

"What started him on this chase after Bronberg?"

The station commander lit a cigarette. "Leroy and Bronberg were pals," he explained. "They were both outer-space men, and worked together on several trips. Leroy hitched himself to a beautiful girl—really beautiful, not one of those man-made products of the beauty salons on Terra. Guess she meant everything to Leroy—he even promised to give up exploring for her. He made one last trip—the Betelgeuse one—and when he got back to Terra the little lady had flown. It seems Bronberg told her the old, old story, and absence didn't make the heart grow fonder for once."

"Women!" The fitter spat.

"Yes, women! Leroy went back, and they broke the news to him. He was a rich man, a very rich man, and so he built the *Constellation* and set out to track down Bronberg. Bronberg abandoned the fair lady on one of those fairy-garden planetoids, after he'd tired of her, and she promptly took poison. That just added fuel to the fire roaring inside Leroy. It's five years now, and he's eaten up more light-years of travel than I care to count, but he's still not caught up. But it won't be long, I'm thinking."

"Yeah," the fitter reflected. "Where was Bronberg going when he called here?"

"He had the wind up. Running for Sirius, I reckon."

"And you told Leroy?"

"I did. I don't sympathise much with either party to the dispute—in fact, I think they're both bloody fools. Still, I'd like to see Leroy catch him up."

He stubbed out his cigarette, and they both passed through the air-lock into the living quarters.

LEROY sat like a rock at the control table of the *Constellation*, and his crew moved silently and efficiently about their duties. He looked an old man, far too old for an outer-space man, and the crew regarded him with the respect due to a man of twice his years. Yet he was still well on the right side of forty. Only his eyes betrayed the spirit of youth that still burned inside him. They were dark, smouldering eyes that could light up like furnaces in an instant and send out dangerous tongues of fire. Outer space held no fears for him, and when his crew quailed and cried out to turn back he would flog them with his tongue, and force them back to their duties with the terrible rage in his eyes. Yet, for all the dangers they endured, the crew was almost the same as that which had originally taken off from Terra.

The Chief Engineer slipped into the vacant chair beside Leroy. For a long time the silent, rugged man seemed unaware of his presence. Then he turned his head slightly.

"That outer auxiliary take-off tube needs repairing," the Chief said. "She won't stand another take-off from a major planet."

"Pull it in and do it," Leroy said in clipped speech.

"It won't be any good. She's blown right through. She'll have to be done at a service base. We've neither the men nor materials to do the job in-ship."

"Patch it then."

"Even then she won't stand a take-off from a planet registered more than five G."

"I don't aim to land on a five G planet," Leroy said. "Unless . . ."

"That's just it, skipper. Unless . . ." The Chief Engineer showed his exasperation. "Unless you decide to land on a five G planet. And if you do, it's ten to one you'll stay there for ever. There's no space patrol in these parts to come and rescue you."

"Where's the nearest service base?"

"Bellatrix Beta."

"Too far." The skipper turned his eyes on the Chief Engineer and they seared him with hot flame. "Listen, Grant," he rasped. "I'm nearer Bronberg than I've ever been. I'm not dropping out of the chase now if every tube in the battery burns down to the metal. We're going on to Sirius, Grant, if I have to push the *Constellation* through space by hand."

Grant shrugged his shoulders. "You're the boss," he said. "I'll patch it up as best I can with what stuff you've got, and I'll pray we don't have to feed in the gravities to breaking point."

"Do your best."

The conversation was at an end. Grant went aft and gave orders for the hauling in-ship of the auxiliary take-off tube. Leroy began to turn over all he knew or could remember of Sirius. The brightest star in the sky of Terra! If Bronberg were there, he'd make it ten times brighter when he unleashed his hatred on the woman-thief. Padowski had made a cursory exploration of Sirius, reported fifteen planets, none suitable for Terran life. Padowski had not landed on any of them, but reported no signs of intelligent life, and said he doubted whether closer exploration was necessary. Leroy wondered why Bronberg had chosen to flee to such an inhospitable part of the galaxy to escape him. Perhaps . . .

A SMALL light flickered on the visiscreen before him. Radar beams reported solid matter ahead, and then probed the nature and shape of the solid matter. There was little doubt after a few minutes what was ahead; Leroy decided it must be one of the outer planets of Sirius.

"Standby to decelerate!" he snapped into the mike beside him. "Crew to stations! Engine-room, bow tubes up to forty G's—over five minutes."

Imperceptibly, the ship began to decelerate. At first the change was slight, but as the speed of light was approached the crew prepared for the blackout that always occurred when the drive passed from supra-light to sub-light speed. The moment came, and all over the space-ship men slumped in their harness as they lost consciousness. Unaffected, relays clicked, automatic controls moved, and the drive continued as though held by the hand of man.

Leroy was first out of the blackout. He pulled himself up to the table again, glanced at the dials in front of him, at the visiscreen, now almost filled with a great white globe, and began to bark orders into the mike beside him. One after another the crew returned to consciousness and took over their duties again from the automatic control.

"Speed now twenty thousand," a speaker over Leroy's head announced. "Deceleration ten G's."

"Cut to normal at one thousand and circle," Leroy ordered. "Switch on all close vision screens."

At once a dozen screens set about the control room flickered into life, and in three of them appeared images of the surface of a planet near to Sirius. The others showed only the nothingness of space.

"Send out identification signals!"

The signals officer across the control chamber began to flick the dials and switches of the huge radio set. Radio waves beat out towards the planet, and remained unanswered, as the ship followed a curving course that approximated to the shape of the planet.

"Dead!" Sparks reported. "Not even a howl!"

Leroy studied the visiscreen, searching the rocky, scarred surface of the planet for any sign of intelligent life. But he could see no more than tumbled ranges of mountains, great flat desolate plains, dust and larva. He circled the planet for four hours, sending out signals all the time, but at last decided that it was devoid of any form of life.

"Nothing there!" he said to the Chief Engineer. "We'll go on to the next one. You can accelerate slowly, and spare that tube."

So the *Constellation* nosed away from the planet, and the radar beams groped inwards towards the bright sun of Sirius, in search of another planet.

THREE planets were searched, and nothing was found to differ from the bleak report of Padowski. The *Constellation* began to circle a fourth and larger planet. Sparks began to send out his identification signals, and all who could be spared studied the images on the visiscreens.

"What's that?" Grant said suddenly. "There beyond that ravine. Look—there! Looks like a pyramid."

He indicated on the screen a dark pile that was very slightly different from the tumbled masses of rock covering the face of the planet. The pile had form, and was roughly triangular. The three corners were clearly defined, and the shadow it cast was distinct from those of the crags and rock.

"Put her down!" Leroy rasped.

Grant grabbed his arm. "Steady, skipper!" he said. "That's a mighty big planet. Remember that tube. Can't we take a closer look before we land? I don't like to over-tax that auxiliary tube."

Leroy hesitated. Maybe Bronberg was not on that planet. It would be a pity to waste that tube merely checking up on what might, after all, be only a natural feature. "O.K.," he said at last. "We'll mark this place on the geo-sphere and then circle again. Keep your eyes skinned."

The navigator calculated, glanced at the dials, and then put a mark on the geo-sphere. The *Constellation* surged as the power went to the drive, and they began to circle the planet.

"Holy Mackerel!" Grant said. "What's that?"

It was another pyramid, but this time there was no doubt as to its origin. It stood on a level plain free from rocks and crags, and it rose to a tapering point a clear thousand feet above the ground level. It was clearly defined and there was no room for error.

"Intelligent life!" Leroy breathed. "Living or extinct! We'll go . . . Jehosaphat! Look there—there, man! It's it!"

He was trembling violently, and at first Grant could not understand what he was pointing at. He stepped in close to the screen, and then gasped.

"A ship!" he yelled. "A space-ship! And if I'm not a Martian, it's the *Dog Star*!"

"Action stations!" Leroy bawled. "Space-suits on, heat guns, crew to landing stations!"

He was sobbing, gasping great gulps of air, tears running down his rugged face. The mighty journey was over, the journey through untold light-years, the journey that had stretched to the limits of the galaxy, and once beyond, towards a nebula. Bronberg was at hand, and Leroy had not long to wait before he could achieve his only goal—the utter destruction of his enemy. Grant helped him into his space-suit, put his heat-gun in his holster,

held him firmly lest he should seem to stagger with emotion.

"Put her down alongside the *Dog Star*," Leroy rasped, and then screwed his helmet into place.

"Hullo!" Sparks cried. "Signals! Terran signals! Hold everything!"

He switched the incoming signals to the intercom speakers and for the first time in three weeks the crew heard a stranger's voice.

"For God's sake keep off!" a voice yelled. "Don't come in, don't come. Get away from this planet. Danger! Can you understand? Sheer off!"

"Switch that bloody thing off!" Leroy cried, and as Sparks hesitated he leapt across the room and snapped the switches. "Put her down!" he rasped.

The crew saw the flame in his eyes, heard the lash in his voice, and began to put the ship down towards the *Dog Star*. She came in with a long, gliding sweep that put her a hundred yards from the stationary ship. She touched down on the level without a bump.

LONG before the forward motion had ceased, Leroy was in the air-lock, with Grant and five of the crew packed in beside him. He waited impatiently, and then as the red light came on he began to turn the locks. The air escaped with a high whistle, and in a few minutes it was possible to step out into the thin atmosphere of the planet.

The level surface of the planet, they discovered to their surprise, was covered with a purple moss that made it as smooth as a billiard table. A hundred yards off the *Dog Star* lay motionless, and beyond her the enormous pyramid reared its sharp head into a light grey sky. Leroy led the way across to the ship, springing lightly over the moss. He reached the bright side of the *Dog Star* and plugged into the intercom.

"Open up, Bronberg!" he said. "Open up or I'll blast my way in!"

The port opened in the side of the ship, and at once they climbed into the air-lock.

"For Pete's sake watch out!" Grant said.

"Don't worry," Leroy answered. "Bronberg just wants to talk his way out of this, you see. He wouldn't risk a fight with heat-guns inside his ship."

Pressure levelled off, a green light flickered, and the inner door opened. The party stamped out into the brightly lit control chamber. Leroy took two paces forward, and faced Bronberg for the first time in seven years.

Both men dropped their hands towards the guns strapped about their hips. Both men checked the movement, let their hands fall to their sides, and then stared into each others eyes. Bronberg was taller, slimmer than Leroy, a well-built handsome man whose face bore the unmistakable lines of outer-space travel.

At last Bronberg spoke. "Why did you land, Leroy?" he grated. "You've killed yourself and your crew."

"I'd land in Hell to get you, Bronberg!"

"This is worse than Hell," Bronberg said bitterly. "You're a fool, Leroy. You let your silly, Terran hatred overcome your training as a space-man. You know the ethical laws, yet you came in without establishing communication. You've murdered your crew, and maybe you've brought destruction to Terra."

Leroy wavered. "What do you mean?" he said.

"This place is a death trap," Bronberg said.

"It doesn't look like it to me—except so far as you're concerned, you blasted rat!"

"Yeah?" Bronberg was grinning sarcastically. "Wait until you try to take off. You know what? There's a fifty G magnetic field over your ship—and over mine. It'd take ten times the power you can muster to lift you clear of this planet."

"Fifty G?" Leroy said, puzzled, suspecting a trap. "There's not that much gravity in the galaxy short of the suns."

"Yes, fifty G. Oh it's not natural, I assure you. This is a six G planet normally, but they've put a fifty G field over us. If you don't believe me, go back and try to take off. I've flogged the drive on this ship until the tubes nearly stripped, trying to lift her. No, Mr. Leroy, you and I are here for a long time."

"What d'you mean by 'they'?" Leroy asked.

"They are the intelligences that dominate this planet."

"You mean the race that built that pyramid?"

"No. The pyramids were built by a sort of slave-race who are the 'hands' of the intelligences."

"What in blazes are you talking about?"

"What I say. This planet is dominated by a super, disembodied set of intelligences. I know it's hard to grasp, but that's what they are. Minds, if you like, but minds that have no physical appendages. These minds use the subject race to do their physical bidding. But the intelligences . . ."

Bronberg shivered, and then he went on, "They're like demons. You'll find out soon enough. They look on physical, material creatures like us as vermin. They're out to dominate the galaxy. Crazy? Maybe, but after you've communed with one of them, you'll understand."

LEROY'S head was whirling. For a moment he had forgotten his hatred of Bronberg, was feeling only the sensations of a space-man when he meets new races, new civilisations.

"Why are they holding you here?" he asked.

Bronberg laughed. "Holding us," he said cynically. "Because they want these ships of ours. They seem to be tied to this planet just as man was to Terra. Although they are disembodied, they seem unable to travel further than this planet without mechanical aid. By some freak they haven't yet been able to perfect a space-ship. I suspect it's not their fault but simply that they can't get the subject race up the right level of operating skill. They're a pretty dumb crowd. Now we've presented them with two perfect ships. All they have to do is hang

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around until we die, or else arm the natives and get rid of us. Then they'll get cracking and the Lord help mankind."

"If this is all a trick——" Leroy began, but Bronberg laughed in his face and stopped him.

"Get back to your ship, Leroy," he said. "Just try to lift her. Go on! You'll find out how much of a trick it is. Then when you're convinced, come back and talk this matter over sanely. We're in a hell of a jam, and I for one don't see how we're going to get out of it!"

LEROY and his party returned to the *Constellation*, but to Grant's relief the skipper did not demand that the space drive be used. Lifting against six Gs would have strained the auxiliary jet to breaking point. If they really were in a fifty G field, the tube would strip out in ten seconds. But when they had passed through their air-lock, the faces of the remainder of the crew told a plain story.

"Hey, skipper, what's gone wrong?" Perrin, the Second asked as soon as Leroy had got out of his space suit. "The gravity stabilisers show fifty-six Gs. Don't tell me this planet is a chunk off a 'White Dwarf' or something? Only colossally high density would account for a reading like that."

"You sure the meters are O.K.?" Leroy grunted.

"Absolutely! I had the boys strip down the reserve channels, and they were ticking over all right. But fifty Gs. Has Saturn shrunk?"

"Take a look, Grant," Leroy said. "I'm going to my bunk to think things out."

He had a lot to think out. A five-year journey through the galaxy, mostly at speeds faster than light, and then to meet up at last with Bronberg. That was something. But to meet up with Bronberg on a strange planet in an alien system, and to be tied with him to that planet by the machinations of an alien and hostile race. That took a lot of working out.

The ethical laws laid down his course of action exactly. Mankind was such a small facet of the vast universe, such a weak growth amid so many perils, that every man who went beyond the field of Terra must be constantly on his guard. There must be no hatred, no rivalry, no fighting, beyond Terra. In space, man must work with man to protect, with his life if necessary, the welfare of the race. If men quarrelled and fought beyond the solar system, then they might create that vital chink in the armour of mankind through which other races, other ideas, might creep.

Leroy sat on his bunk for a long time, and when he went back to the control chamber, his mind was made up. The revenge must be forgotten; the present dangers must be faced together. Leroy ordered space-suits for the same party, and five minutes later they stepped out of the outer port on to the mossy surface of the planet again.

"Come on!" Leroy rapped over the intercom, and started towards the *Dog Star*. The others fell in behind him.

Leroy never described what happened then with any exactitude afterwards. He said he felt as though a strong wind suddenly came up, and swirled cyclone-like about him. Into his mind harsh, alien

thoughts suddenly leapt, thoughts which were as clear cut as knife blades. Alien thoughts that probed into him, hurting him, sucking at the root of his being. He reeled, and would have fallen if Grant had not caught his arm. Then, in an instant, he was himself again, and the alien thoughts had gone, leaving behind a bitter train.

He knew the dangers that faced not only the handful of men now on the planet, but dangers that threatened the whole of the human race. This alien race, these disembodied minds, regarded material creatures as vermin to be exterminated. Given the secret of space travel, they would make themselves masters of the universe.

Leroy's face was white as he stripped off his space-suit in the control room of the *Dog Star*.

"Let bygones be bygones!" he rasped at Bronberg. "I can never forgive or forget, but I must obey the ethical laws. We must work together in the face of these evil things."

"Good!" Bronberg said, relieved. "Let's put our heads together."

THEY retired to the master's cabin, and Grant and his opposite number on the *Dog Star* went into a huddle.

"Yes," Chief Engineer Trent said. "We've tracked the field to its source. It's that pyramid. They've got vast machines inside there. God knows what they're for normally, but it didn't take them long to alter them and create this field that's holding us."

"Well, we'll go up to the pyramid and blast it right open."

Trent laughed. "Easy, eh? We tried it! We went up there and found the entrance—a huge door about a hundred feet square. We started to go in with our blasters, and those devils came out. They've got no bodies, I'll admit, but boy, did they cause confusion. Like tornados, they were. They bundled us out of that place in fifty seconds, and left most of us unconscious on the ground. We had a second shot, and this time they hurled us a hundred yards. If it hadn't been for the moss, none of us would have survived. As it is, we've half a dozen men in sick bay with broken bones."

"D'you try the blasters on the place?"

"Hopeless. These dervishes tore them out of our hands and hurled them a mile."

"Then we must find some other solution. It's fifty G's they've turned on all right. I checked our gravity stabilisers right through, and they were perfect."

"I know. I tested ours. Perfect. But . . . I say! Has it ever occurred to you that despite that colossal field outside, the gravity stabilisers inside the ships, and the portable ones in the space-suits, neutralise back to norm?"

"Well?"

"Back to norm, man! Can't you see? Inside the ship there's no fifty G field. The stabilisers see to that. Supposing we could get the stabilisers to neutralise the field immediately outside the ships? It would enable us to get up enough momentum to break clear of the planet!"

"Be sensible! The stabilisers have a very local effect."

"That's only because they're running on an interior power circuit. Supposing we switched full power from the generators into them?"

"They'd burn out in two shakes. Then we'd never be able to accelerate to supra-light speeds and it would take us several lives to get back to Terra."

"That's true. But supposing we sacrificed one ship—put all the power into the stabilisers of that ship, burning it to ashes if you like, and the other took off in the temporary deflection of the fifty G field?"

"It's a chance, man. Come on, let's put it to the captains."

Leroy and Bronberg listened in silence. Trent went further.

"We'd have to use the *Constellation* to provide the deflection, sir," he said. "Grant tells me she's got a duff tube, and it would strip if excess drive was fed to it."

"The *Constellation*!" Leroy rapped. "Will you hell!"

"It's the only way, sir!" Grant said. "I'd never risk that tube in an emergency full drive take off. At the best of times we'd have difficulty clearing the planet."

Suddenly Leroy folded up. "O.K.," he said. "I agree. The ethical laws must be obeyed. We'll burn up my ship, Bronberg. I might as well lose the ship as well. I've lost everything else." He seemed a broken man now.

IT took eight hours to shift all the essential gear and stores from one ship to the other, and while the crews carried equipment across the moss, the combined fitters and technicians worked at the stabilisers of the *Constellation*. There was to be no room for a slip up. Dual controls, dual feeds, dual convertors were fitted, tested, found good. When full power went into the box, sparks were coming out in plenty! Then the crew of the old ship packed their kits and began their last passage over the moss to the *Dog Star*. At last they were all aboard the space-ship.

Bronberg crouched over the control table.

"All set?" he asked.

Grant and Trent at his elbows, nodded. Grant was white-faced, strained, haggard.

"Where's Leroy?" Bronberg asked.

Grant fidgeted. He opened his mouth to speak, and then a voice cracked in from the speaker over the table.

"O.K., Bronberg!" Leroy said. "Start feeding drive. Soon as she quivers, give me the wire!"

"What in blazes!" Bronberg yelled.

"D'you think I'd go back to Terra in your ship, Bronberg, and with you alongside me?" The voice was bitter, sneering. "Think again, you rat. The ethical laws have got to be obeyed. But I can't forget my hatred for you and yours. I'm going to Hell with my ship. There's nothing left for me to do. Now get moving!"

For a moment Bronberg hesitated, and then he stretched forward and began to snap contacts. The great ship began to quiver as she strained against the fifty G field.

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"She was a good ship," Grant said sadly.

"He was a fine man," Trent added.

Bronberg poured in the drive and the *Dog Star* began her vast journey back to earth. He looked twenty years older.

THE END.

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